

Shattering the Sacred Myths - Chapter 1

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Troubled Times

A short summary of the cultural problems faced by the modern world.

When you have an open debate between conflicting points of view, the defenders of each viewpoint are pressured into presenting their best possible arguments. But those who cannot defend their beliefs have nothing to gain from an open debate. Their best strategy is to silence any opposition whenever their point of view is challenged.

Our world has a long history of political and religious extremists using violence to force their beliefs upon others. Even in the modern democratic world where freedom of speech has become an almost sacred right, this freedom is far from assured when it comes to matters of religion.

The reason why freedom of speech is so important is because the truth is more likely to be discovered if people have an opportunity to listen to every argument and decide for themselves. The only kind of truth that is really worth defending is the kind that can withstand criticism, and the kind that we can believe in without being forced to.

The following may not be true for everybody, but why should we let the truth stand in the way of a good story.

Ancient mythmakers There was a time in the dark past when peace and prosperity were regularly interrupted by conquest and destruction. Invading armies and bandits raided towns and villages, slaughtering the inhabitants, and sometimes carrying the survivors away as slaves. Revenge was the prevailing form of justice in a world where human life had little value.

Peasant farmers and villagers struggled through hardship to raise their families. They shared stories around the fire at night and sang songs about the adventures of legendary heroes. Their priests held sacrifices and prayed to the gods for plentiful harvests and good fortune in war. Myths about the gods and legends about heroes helped to inspire a common sense of honesty, loyalty, and bravery.

A detailed recording of history began in some parts of the world around three thousand years ago as the development of alphabetic writing allowed written words to flow as freely and with almost as much meaning and emotion as spoken words. The first significant works of literature began to appear in the emerging civilizations of Israel, Greece, Persia, and India.

Alphabetic writing gave innovative scribes an opportunity to rework the best of their old myths and legends and weave them together to form long and detailed national histories and other stories about the origins of humankind and our relationship to the gods.

The great responsibility that weighed upon these ancient scribes was to convince their people to have faith in universal ideas of right and wrong, and to develop in them a commitment to social justice, and a sense of duty to work towards the welfare and survival of the community.

Greek poets wrote that the gods would favor the good while raining misfortune down upon the wicked. Jewish prophets wrote that the god of creation would punish sinners and bring about the destruction of wicked nations. They believed that messengers would continue to be sent to teach them right from wrong.

Persian prophets described the final day at the end of time when the dead would rise up from their graves to be judged for their deeds. The righteous would rest comfortably in heaven and the wicked would be cast into hell to burn for eternity. Hindu scribes demanded obedience by threatening reincarnation as a slave or a farm animal.

In the absence of anything better, these writings offered believable explanations. They gave the struggling farmers and villagers a reason for wholesome living and hope for a better future. The best

of these writings survived the hostility of ancient priests and gained the favor of kings. As they were handed down through the generations, they grew in authority to become sacred scriptures.

Religions helped to hold kingdoms and empires together under a common understanding of existence. Those who believed in the myths and embraced the moral lessons would be less motivated by selfishness and more committed to community and family values. Empires might fall into decline, but the minds of the masses would continue to be united by their ancient religious scriptures.

As the centuries passed, corrupt priesthoods maintained an iron grip on power by silencing any ideas that were contradictory to their teachings. Tyrants used religion as an excuse to enslave and destroy. But many common folk were strengthened by their faith, resisting the temptation to descend into savagery. They were inspired to remain honest and caring in an otherwise cruel and deceptive world.

Scientific discovery Before the year 1450, books were rare and few people knew how to read. Many received their understanding of the world through the teachings of priests. Things suddenly changed with the invention of the printing press in Europe. Writers could now share their ideas with people who previously could not afford to read because they could not afford the price of a hand copied book. Common knowledge grew rapidly as books were made available on a growing range of subjects.

Modern science began in the 1600s with the invention of the telescope and the idea of gravity to explain the motion of the planets around the sun. People were able to see for the first time that the earth was not the center of the universe. Religious explanations would now be increasingly replaced by scientific ones. Some writers began to openly criticize religious beliefs.

Traditional religion suffered its most serious blow in the 1860s with the widespread acceptance of the theory of evolution. Skeptics could now prove that the creation stories contained in the old religious scriptures were nothing more than ancient myths. But not everybody was convinced by evolution. Many supporters of religion feared that if people lost faith in religious myths then they might also lose interest in community and family values.

Science has seriously weakened religion, and now some people claim that only science can show us the truth. But science by itself has nothing inspiring to say about important human values like love, justice, compassion, or goodness. According to a purely scientific view of the world, our loved ones are little more than sacks of protein, and our love for them is just an electro-chemical impulse in our brain.

Science can demonstrate the relative advantage of some types of behavior, but it cannot judge any behavior to be either right or wrong. If we depended only on science to guide our thoughts and actions, then we would have no reason to be caring, sharing, or honest unless we had something to gain. Many of those who believe only in science say that life has no purpose, and that our existence is nothing more than an accident of nature.

Industrial revolution By the mid 1800s, consumer goods were being mass produced in steam powered factories and shipped around the world by steam powered trains and ships. Steam power was soon replaced by petrol engines and electric motors. A new age of modern conveniences and technological wizardry had begun.

In only a few hundred years, industry has grown to become the most powerful force on the planet, and now the market economy dictates human behavior. Greed and ambition are the driving forces behind success in the business world.

The winners are the corporate raiders who take over the boardrooms of public companies, plundering the assets and pocketing millions at the expense of company employees and small shareholders. The losers are the poor working class families who struggle to buy bread. The least fortunate become victims of debt, unemployment, poverty, relationship breakdown, loneliness, drug and alcohol abuse, and crime. Many workers around the world struggle to earn barely enough to buy food and shelter while they raise the next generation of industrial slaves.

The market economy creates its own set of values. Many of us now judge our progress through life not by the growth of our character or by the maturity of our understanding, but rather by our possessions; by the cars, houses, and luxury items that we obtain. Under increasing pressure to

succeed, many workers now sacrifice friendships and family relationships, seeing them as obstacles to the pursuit of a career.

Modern democratic culture The emergence of democracy around the world has given people the power to protest against oppression. Progressive governments are continually reforming the laws to satisfy the changing needs of the people and provide a fairer system of justice. A new culture has emerged in the democratic world that promotes freedom of choice, equal opportunity, and respect for human rights. And this new way of thinking has resulted in a more caring and tolerant society.

Newspapers, television networks, and other forms of mass media have embraced these new values. And by comparison, some of the old religious morals now seem oppressive and backwards. And while some people, especially the older generations, cling to the old ways of thinking, their children are now learning new ideas about right and wrong from watching commercial television and listening to popular music.

But the entertainment industry is driven by the pursuit of profits without being restrained by any real sense of social responsibility. While celebrating increasing freedom from religious morality, low quality productions compete to stretch the bounds of social acceptability. The mass media has become a reflection of human greed, ego, hatred, and perversity. Some people see the cutting edge of modern culture as being an unashamed glorification of sex and violence.

The Internet provides a powerful alternative to government propaganda and corporate media brainwashing. An unrestricted channel of communication has been opened, and now people have cheap instant access to ideas and information that they could never have discovered before. But much of the Internet is like a digital sewer full of unfiltered misinformation and pornography. Some people see it as being symptomatic of the unhealthy condition of modern thinking.

Confusion Many of those who live in modern societies are now abandoning their traditional religious beliefs and adopting a more materialistic outlook on life. In the absence of any believable explanation for human existence, many now believe that there is nothing worth believing in. Without any purpose or meaning to their lives, many are descending into despair and depression. Without any clear vision for the future of the world, the nations are continuing to prepare for war.

Amid growing fear and anxiety, religious conservatives are gaining political power around the world. They do not want their children growing up without hope for the future, to become another generation whose only sense of self worth is their physical appearance or their possessions, and whose only purpose is to stimulate the pleasure centers in their brains. They do not want their children growing up to become too selfish, confused, and immature to be able to successfully raise their own families.

But for many people, the old religious myths are no longer believable and the old religious morality is no longer acceptable. And ancient religious rivalries are plunging the world into a new age of war and terror. American forces have launched a campaign to democratize the Middle East, while Islamic extremists are waging a holy war against modern democratic values. We wait for the next attack, possibly the detonation of a nuclear bomb. And we watch helplessly as our politicians bumble their way through one world crisis after the next.

Hope Most of us are still being confused by beliefs that have long lost their value, and there is now a desperate need to provide clearer explanations of the issues that give meaning to our lives.

Like in the days of the ancient mythmakers, recent discoveries and new technologies have provided an unprecedented opportunity to take the best of our existing historical narratives and scientific explanations and carefully weave them together to craft a more enlightened understanding of our existence that is more suitable for the times in which we live.

In the hope of bringing some clarity into this confused world, this book was written to offer a realistic and convincing explanation of our place in the universe, hopefully crafted well enough to restore the faith of those who believe, and to give faith to those who do not yet believe, that our world may be progressing towards a peaceful, prosperous, and rational future.

The Story of Human Evolution

An easy-to-read step-by-step explanation of natural evolution from the big bang to the rise of civilization.

Few people seem to be interested in questioning the existence of the universe. Most people are too busy dealing with the responsibilities and distractions of daily life. They do not have the time or the inclination to contemplate the existence of the universe. They just want simple answers that are presented to them in an interesting way.

Other people say that there is no point asking why the universe exists, because without any evidence, we can only ever guess the answer. But questioning the existence of the universe is essential, because until we understand our relationship with the universe, then how can we ever really know who we are or what we are supposed to be doing, other than to blindly follow our instincts and attempt to satisfy our desires?

Unfortunately, debate about the existence of the universe is still being clouded by popular religious myths that were devised at a time when we knew very little about the universe. While some people close their minds in blind acceptance of these myths, others close their minds in blind reaction against them.

There are countless ideas and opinions that have been expressed over the last three thousand years of written history. The most influential of these ideas will be discussed later in this book. But after stripping away all of the myths and misconceptions, and distilling the answers down to their purest essence, there remains only two possibilities.

One possibility is that our universe exists for no reason and has no purpose, and so our lives have no meaning other than whatever meaning we invent for ourselves. The other possibility is that we were brought into existence by some kind of purposeful process beyond space and time. A process which designed the universe and planned the events that led to the natural evolution of intelligent life.

At this point in time, there is no conclusive evidence to prove either way, and there may never be any evidence. In order to gain the best possible understanding of our existence, we need to open our minds to both possibilities and thoroughly examine them both to their eventual conclusions. This book will attempt to undertake such an examination.

We will start our investigation by going back to the beginning, to the birth of the universe and the evolution of humankind. From there, we will follow the events of human history that led to the modern age, to the discovery of computer technology and genetic engineering. Along the way, we will look for clues that might reveal some kind of purpose to our existence.

The journey will not be easy. Most of what we think we know about our origins has only recently been reconstructed from scant pieces of evidence. And when we read about history, it is hard to separate fact from fiction. The truth always seems to become shrouded by thickening clouds of myth. History is forever being revised to support popular political or religious beliefs, and increasingly questionable interpretations of history continue to appear.

Sometimes even scientific beliefs can turn out to be myths. Science is about searching for the best explanation based upon the existing evidence, knowing that some day new evidence might be discovered and a better explanation might be found. In any case, the credibility of any scientific theory depends on its popularity among those who are in a position to impose their opinion.

The following account of human evolution has been kept simple in order for it to be more understandable. Most of the information presented here is widely accepted by the scientific community, but many of the details are still being argued over by evolutionary biologists. There are some things that we may never know for sure, and so when it comes to exploring our origins, we may need to accept that there will always be a degree of myth in our history.

The birth of the universe At the beginning of time, the universe was born when space opened up and was filled with an enormous explosion of energy. As the energy from this explosion radiated out into space, it cooled down and began to condense into matter.

Within a fraction of a second, most of the initial energy had condensed into fundamental particles of matter. After hundreds of thousands of years, as the universe continued to expand and cool down, these particles began to condense into atoms.

Enormous clouds of atoms were drawn together by gravity. They spiraled inwards and were crushed together to form massive solid bodies of matter. The immense pressure and heat inside these bodies caused nuclear reactions, and they exploded with intense light and heat to become stars.

Great collections of these newly born stars were drawn together by gravity to form galaxies. Today's universe contains hundreds of billions of galaxies, each containing hundreds of billions of stars. The universe has continued to expand now for over twelve billion years.

The formation of the earth Stars release enormous amounts of energy by converting lighter elements like hydrogen into heavier elements like carbon and iron. All of the heavy elements in the universe were forged in the hearts of stars. Stars continue to burn brightly for billions of years, and then when they run out of nuclear fuel, they often explode, scattering their elements across space.

Our solar system was formed out of the rubble left behind by nearby stars that had exploded. This rubble was drawn together by gravity to form a huge spinning cloud of rocks and dust. At the center of this cloud, the cosmic material was crushed together and exploded into life as a medium sized star, our Sun.

As the remaining rubble continued to revolve around the Sun, it was drawn together by gravity. Huge pieces of rock collided and were fused together by heat to form the planets and their moons. Any material that was not absorbed by the planets was left to circle the sun as asteroids and comets.

Our Earth began as a mass of molten rock covered by a hard, crusty, outer layer. Movements and eruptions in the Earth's surface produced mountains and valleys. As the surface of the Earth cooled down, clouds of steam condensed and water fell from the sky to form rivers, lakes, and oceans.

Organic molecules Common elements like hydrogen, carbon, and oxygen are easily attracted to each other. They bond together to form chemical compounds like water and carbon dioxide. It is more natural for these elements to combine into chemical compounds than it is for them to be found in their pure form.

Under the right conditions, carbon has a tendency to bond with other common elements to form long and complex chains of atoms known as organic molecules. Organic molecules can then bond with other organic molecules, and there seems to be no limit to how long and complex these organic molecular chains can become.

Billions of years ago, the conditions on the surface of the earth were very favorable for the formation of organic molecules. These molecules were washed into the sea to form pools of organic matter on the sea floor. Over millions of years, they continued to bond together to form increasingly long and complex molecular chains.

The first spark of life Life began when one of these complex organic molecules began reacting with the other molecules around it in an unusual way. It was able to attract all of the pieces that it needed to assemble an identical copy of itself. The copy then split away from the original and began to assemble its own new copy.

These self-replicating molecules may not have lasted long before they were broken down by other chemical reactions, but they were still able to spread through the pool of organic material fast enough to have a lasting chain reaction.

The process of self-replication was not always perfect. Quite often a piece was missing or the wrong piece was used, and the copy would be different from its parent. Very few of these mutated molecules were still capable of replicating, but occasionally, by pure chance, a new molecule was created that could survive longer or replicate faster than its parent.

Single cells After millions of years and countless mutations, new and more complex molecules developed a protective layer. The chemicals needed for replication could still pass through this protective layer, but the molecule was now safe from harmful reactions. The protective layer slowly evolved into a cell wall, and safely contained within the cell, the chemical reactions of life were able to evolve to become much more complex.

It took hundreds of millions of years, but eventually a new process evolved for producing a copy of a cell. This new process used a number of molecules working together like an assembly line in a factory, using chemical attraction to assemble sophisticated molecules known as proteins, which then carried out all of the tasks associated with the survival and reproduction of the cell. The instructions for how to build these proteins were encoded in the main molecule, known as the DNA.

As the mutations continued over hundreds of millions of years, new strains evolved the ability to use sunlight to convert common chemicals into food. This ability, known as photosynthesis, has the side effect of producing oxygen.

Before photosynthesis, there was no oxygen in the earth's atmosphere. Then after millions of years of photosynthesis, the atmosphere became rich with oxygen. We know this because the oxygen reacted with dissolved iron in the seawater and deposited a layer of rust on the ocean floor. Oxygen also formed the ozone layer, which still protects the surface of the earth from the sun's deadly radiation.

There were occasions in the history of evolution, when a smaller cell became trapped inside the body of a larger cell, and the children of the smaller cell survived and reproduced inside the children of the larger cell. Sometimes these smaller cells provided benefits to the larger cell, and sometimes they continued to evolve inside the larger cell over millions of years to become permanent organs of the larger cell.

One of the most important steps in the evolution of life was the appearance inside some cells of an organ called the nucleus. The nucleus had evolved to become especially good at copying and repairing its own DNA, and so the DNA inside the nucleus was able to become thousands of times more complex. Cells with a nucleus soon evolved to become thousands of times larger and more sophisticated than cells without a nucleus.

The process of evolution Evolution begins when there is an error during reproduction and the new cell is different from its parent. Mutant cells usually die, and those that survive are likely to be disadvantaged by their mutation. Only very rarely will a mutant perform better than its parent. The descendants of the mutant cell may then successfully compete against the rest of the population and eventually replace them.

The more often an organism mutates, the faster it evolves, and so the faster it can adapt to changing conditions and the more successfully it can compete against other variations. The pressure to evolve faster has forced cell reproduction to maintain a consistently high rate of mutation. Only the need for enough healthy individuals to survive stops the mutation rate from being higher.

A larger population has a higher chance of producing a beneficial mutation. But then a considerable amount of time may need to pass before the mutant population grows large enough to have any chance of producing a second beneficial mutation.

This problem was overcome by the appearance of sexual reproduction. By combining the DNA from two parents, a child cell can inherit the beneficial mutations from two separate ancestries. Beneficial mutations can then spread back into an existing population, and this greatly magnifies the rate of evolution.

The rate of evolution is also increased by having only a limited period of time during which an organism can breed. After the breeding cycle is over, there is little evolutionary pressure to resist disease, cell degradation, and the other signs of aging which lead to a natural death. The lifespan of an organism becomes balanced between how much more the parent can contribute to its offspring and how heavily the parent must compete against its offspring for resources.

Multi-celled animals After billions of years of evolution, the rivers, lakes, and oceans of the world were swarming with a rich variety of single celled organisms. Some cells, such as algae, got their energy directly from sunlight, and some cells survived by eating other cells.

The most advanced single celled organisms had tiny arms that could swim through the water. They responded to touch, had a sense of smell, and were sensitive to light. They could swim towards food, avoid obstacles and predators, and identify sexual partners.

Around a billion years ago, a mutation occurred during the reproduction of an algae cell that caused the newly divided cells to stick together. These cells formed sheets of algae that became the first primitive form of seaweed.

Other mutations led to changes inside the cells each time they divided. Different layers could now appear inside a growing organism. The instructions for how cells changed each time they divided were contained in the DNA. Any mutations to these instructions would change the size and shape of the growing organism.

Around 600 million years ago, the first multi-celled animals began to appear. The most successful of these were small, flat, worm-like creatures that absorbed algae through the outer layer of their bodies. Over time, they evolved the ability to wrap their bodies around large particles of food. Digestive juices were released onto the food to break it down before the nutrients were absorbed into the body.

Further mutations led to the development of an opening where food could be drawn in, digested, and then passed out. This opening slowly evolved into a tube running through the body. Food could be broken down more efficiently as it passed through the tube from the mouth to the rear.

Sensory perception The success of an animal depended upon how much information it could collect from its surroundings. Worms had inherited a sense of smell from their single celled ancestors. They depended on this sense to detect the chemicals released by food. The cells around the mouth evolved so that when food was detected, signals would be passed through the body, triggering muscle cells to expand and contract, causing the worm to slowly wriggle towards the food.

The sensitive cells around the mouth and the cells that carried signals through the body evolved into a network of nerve cells. Any mutations to these nerve cells could change the way that the animal behaved. Evolution favored mutations that drove the animal to find more food, avoid danger, and breed more. The accumulation of advantageous mutations to nerve cells over millions of years led to the development of complex patterns of behavior.

However, it was not enough to always react in the same inherited way to each type of sensation. A particular smell might indicate food in some environments but danger in others. By remembering the association between a sensation and its outcome, mistakes did not have to be made a second time and successful outcomes could be pursued more vigorously.

Worms also inherited sensitivity to touch, temperature, and light from their single celled ancestors. A cluster of light sensitive cells has the potential to form a picture, and so there was strong evolutionary pressure for such clusters to evolve into early forms of eyes.

There was also strong evolutionary pressure for a large cluster of nerve cells to grow where the signal paths from the various senses intersected with the control paths for the muscles. This cluster of nerve cells evolved into the first primitive type of brain.

Predators and prey Before worms could evolve to become larger, they first needed a system to pump oxygen and nutrients through their bodies. While most worms continued to feed on algae, the larger ones began feeding on the smaller ones. Those with tougher skin were harder to eat, and so over many millions of years, the skin of some animals evolved into a hard outer shell.

Animals with protective shells were best suited to crawling along the sea floor, but predators were able to move faster and find more food by swimming through the water. The most efficient way to swim was to wriggle from side to side. This style of motion was made more effective by having hard parts inside the body. These hard parts began as fluid-filled spaces which later accumulated minerals to take the form of bones.

Early animals were very successful at swimming around, looking for food, and finding sexual partners. As populations grew, so did the number of mutations. As long as life was easy, food was abundant, and partners were easy to find, then there would be nothing to stop new variations from flourishing. This stage of evolution was like a 'trying out' period for new animal designs. Within a short period of time, the oceans were filled with animals that came in a multitude of weird and wonderful shapes and sizes.

After millions more years of evolution, predators became larger, faster, and smarter. Only those smaller creatures that could swim faster, burrow into the sand, and those with protective shells were able to avoid being eaten. As smaller creatures became better at surviving in this hostile new environment, pressure grew on the predators to sharpen their hunting skills. The competition grew so fierce that most variations were wiped out. The only survivors were those whose body designs were so successful that many of their descendents are still alive today.

Plants Around 500 million years ago, there were several hundred different types of marine animals including early forms of crabs and fish. Fresh water lakes had become fertile environments. Plants living in shallow water were able to gain more nutrients by anchoring themselves into the mud. Once anchored, they began branching towards the surface to collect more sunlight.

Plants and animals living near the water's edge were regularly exposed to the air by rising and falling tides, and lake water could become dangerously shallow during times of drought. Creatures living in these areas needed to survive for longer periods of time out of the water. Plants adapted by becoming weatherproof and growing strong enough to support their own weight. These changes allowed them to begin growing branches permanently above the water line.

Around 420 million years ago, the first plants appeared that could survive entirely on the land. Once they had taken their first step, nothing could stop them from spreading across the empty continents. They thrived in any region with regular rainfall and nutrient rich soil. They evolved rapidly as they adapted to new landscapes and climates. Within tens of millions of years, the land was covered by a dense forest of trees with branches and leaves.

Plants were soon followed onto the land by creatures with hard protective shells. Crabs, sea scorpions, and other shelled animals had been very successful in the sea. As they crawled onto the land they evolved into ants, beetles, spiders, and other insects. Within 50 million years, some variations had evolved wings and were able to fly.

Reptiles Fish living in shallow water swamps and wetlands needed to propel themselves through the mud and vegetation. This favored stronger muscles around the fins, the bones in their fins became longer, and the tips of their fins became more claw-like. Their gills were less effective in the shallow muddy water, and so they developed lungs to draw more air from the surface. Those with thicker scales and more weatherproof skin were able to spend longer periods of time above the surface of the water.

By around 360 million years ago, animals that were half fish and half reptile were spending as much time crawling over the mud banks as they were swimming through the water. These creatures continued to evolve into reptiles, but they did not conquer the land for another 50 million years, not until their eggs had developed tough waterproof shells allowing them to be laid out of the water.

Mammals The temperature of seawater does not vary much, and so animals living in the sea are able to keep a relatively constant body temperature. Moving onto the land meant surviving a much wider range of temperatures, with cold nights and cold winters. The chemical reactions inside cells are sensitive to temperature. As the temperature drops, these reactions become slower.

Reptiles depend on the warmth of the sun during the day. They become sluggish at night and in cold weather, and they can only live in regions that have mild winters. Their cells do not generate enough energy for them to actively hunt for food, and so they usually wait for prey to come near. Some early land reptiles evolved large fins on their backs to absorb more heat from the sun.

Reptiles walk on four legs that sprawl from the sides of their bodies, a configuration that helps them to move through the water. Around 300 million years ago, a new family of reptiles appeared with legs that were positioned beneath the body instead to give better support for walking on the land. These

new animals were the earliest ancestors of mammals, and they rose to dominate a landscape rich with plant and insect life.

Early mammals also adapted to living on the land by evolving higher body temperatures. This allowed them to move faster over longer distances and more actively search for food. They could hunt any time of the day or night, in any season, and could survive further north or south in colder climates. They evolved hairs on their skin to retain body warmth in cold weather.

Dinosaurs Around 240 million years ago, another successful branch of reptiles evolved into the dinosaurs. These creatures also had legs that supported them on the land, and they also benefited from a higher body temperature. But the dinosaur's body weight was shifted back so they could stand on two legs. This allowed them to run faster and reach higher than the four legged mammals.

Maintaining a higher body temperature requires a considerable amount of energy. Warm blooded animals use up to ten times more energy than cold blooded ones do. They need to find more food and eat at more regular intervals. Warm blooded animals also grow faster, reproduce more, and evolve more rapidly. In the fierce competition for the position of top predator, the dinosaurs proved to be superior to the mammals, and by 200 million years ago, the dinosaurs had completely conquered the land.

Only the smallest mammals survived. These were forced to retreat into colder regions where they lived in burrows under the ground and only emerged at night to hunt for insects. Mammals adapted to the colder regions by giving birth to live young rather than laying eggs. The developing young were kept safe and warm inside the mother's body where they received oxygen and nutrients from the mother's blood. After being born, the infants continued to receive nutrients by drinking their mother's milk.

Learned behavior Many animals are born with all of their survival skills. They do not need to learn anything from their parents and are able to fend for themselves as soon as they are born. But instinctual patterns of behavior can take thousands of generations to evolve, and there are limits to how complex this behavior can become. There are limits to how much information can be passed down to the next generation through body chemistry alone.

Some animals spend months or even years learning more complex patterns of behavior by imitating their parents and other family members. Mammals evolved an extra layer of brain tissue surrounding the instinctual part of their brain. This extra layer helped them to override their instinctual behavior with learned skills.

The more that mammals came to depend on learned behavior, the less able their young were to care for themselves, and the more time they needed to learn from their parents. The degree to which learned behavior was able to replace inherited behavior depended on how skillfully parents could care for and educate their increasingly helpless infants.

Most of an animal's brain is used to control its body, and so larger animals need larger brains. Animals that depend more on learning need an even larger brain in proportion to their body size. But brains can use up to ten times more energy than other organs in the body. And so the evolution of a larger brain was partly limited by the ability to find more food.

The evolution of a larger brain was also limited by how easily the head of a baby can pass through the mother's birth canal. Animals with larger brains need to be born at earlier stages of their development, when their heads are smaller. This makes newborn babies even more dependent on the care of their parents until their brains are fully developed.

As mammals evolved to depend more on learning, they also developed stronger emotional attachments. Strong instinctual feelings of affection were needed to drive parents to care for their children, drive children to imitate their parents, and keep family members together long enough for the young to learn how to survive.

Cooperation and competition In the natural world, the number of animals that can survive in an area depends on the amount of food that the land can produce. Numbers may grow until there is no longer enough food to support every animal. Then competition between individuals to satisfy their hunger becomes fierce. Younger animals may not be able to compete against stronger and more experienced ones. The population will be limited by the number of young that can survive long enough to breed.

Some animals develop such strong instinctual affections that they continue to live together in family groups. Groups of animals must compete against nearby groups for food, but animals within each group can often do better by sharing their food with other group members and by cooperating in other ways that help the survival of the young.

Members of the same group still need to compete against each other. Stronger members will fight to breed with the most desirable partners. When food is scarce, they will muscle each other for the largest share of the meal. Weaker members will compete for the affections of those who can secure them more food and better protection.

For each type of animal, there will be a balance between how much they can cooperate and how much they need to compete against other group members. When conditions change, so will the best balance between competition and cooperation.

The extinction of the dinosaurs Every day the earth is showered by rocks from outer space. Many of these explode in the atmosphere, appearing as bright streaks of light in the sky. Larger rocks can break through the atmosphere and smash into the earth, sometimes causing enormous damage. Approximately once every few thousand years, the earth is struck hard enough to destroy an area the size of a small city. One impact every few hundred million years can be so destructive that the whole world is shaken by earthquakes, tidal waves, and volcanic eruptions.

Around 65 million years ago, a massive rock slammed into the earth with devastating impact. The explosion was so powerful that it incinerated everything within a thousand mile radius. Forest fires and volcanic eruptions sent thick clouds of dust and smoke into the sky, blocking out the sun around the world for many months. As the sunlight faded, the temperature began to drop. Plants withered as they were starved of sunlight and food became scarce. All of the large land animals died, as did many of the smaller ones.

The only dinosaurs to survive were the birds, who were able to fly above the carnage to search for scraps of food. Among the survivors on the ground were the small furry mammals who were well adapted to cold conditions. Being the only remaining land animal with warm blood, no other animal could now compete against the mammals for dominance on the land. Mammals rapidly evolved into a wide variety of shapes and sizes to take advantage of all of the new opportunities left behind by the extinction of the dinosaurs.

The evolution of mammals Although there appears to be large differences between different species of mammal, all mammals are variations of the same basic design. For example, they all have the same set of bones. The bones of the human hand are arranged in a similar way to the bones of a bat's wing or a whale's flipper. The only significant difference is that the bones are different sizes.

Large differences can appear between ancestors and their descendents with only minor changes to those parts of the DNA that control the timing of childhood growth and the rate at which different body parts grow.

Species remain relatively unchanged for long periods of time. Significant mutations are rare, but when they do occur, a new group may break away from the original group and take over new environments for which they are better adapted. If the new group is successful enough, they may completely replace the original group.

Tree dwellers While most mammals adapted to living on the ground, some adapted to living in the trees. Trees were safe from most predators and they provided a rich diet of fruit and insects. Some tree dwellers evolved fingers and thumbs for grasping onto branches. Long snouts are awkward when clinging to trees, and so their faces became flatter and their eyes moved to the front of their face, allowing better judgment of distances when leaping between trees.

Most animals that live on the ground need to be able to walk soon after they are born. But tree dwellers can cling to their mothers in the same way that their mothers can cling to trees. Being carried around and cared for by their mothers for a longer period of time allowed their brains to evolve to depend more on learned behavior and less on instinct.

Some tree dwellers became too large to walk across the tops of branches and began swinging beneath them instead. Their bodies became too heavy for their tails to act as a counterbalance, and so they lost their tails and developed a more upright posture to keep themselves balanced. Fewer branches could now support their weight. Instead of leaping between trees, they climbed down and walked between them.

The ancestors of humans Around 7 million years ago, some of these ape-like creatures moved away from the forests and began living on the grass covered plains. As they spent less time in trees and more time traveling across open ground, evolutionary pressure favored those with longer legs, and they began walking upright.

Their hands were no longer needed for walking and could be used for a variety of other tasks such as gathering food or using sticks and stones as weapons. They could now hunt larger animals and carry the meat back to share with the rest of the group. Being able to provide better care for their increasingly helpless infants allowed them to continue to evolve larger brains that were more adapted towards learning. These animals were the early ancestors of humans.

They began breaking stones apart to create sharp edges which could be used to cut wood, meat, and bone. Around one million years ago, they learned how to keep fires burning and began cooking their meals. Cooked food required less chewing and so their jaws evolved to become smaller.

The competition between different groups of early humans was fierce. Those who could make better weapons, and those who were more skilled at using them had a distinct advantage. Increased competition, better parental care, better communication, and an increasingly complex lifestyle, all of these factors drove the evolution of a larger and more adaptable brain. Groups that evolved larger brains outcompeted and replaced groups that did not.

The power of speech The shift towards learning was accompanied by an increased sense of curiosity. When one member of a group discovered a new way of doing something, the others would watch and imitate the idea. Older members of the group might be slow to change their habits, but the younger ones would grow up knowing only the new way. Group behavior usually adapts over time to make the most efficient use of the available resources. New discoveries are rare. New ideas usually come through contact with other groups.

Animals communicate by making sounds and using body gestures to express their emotions. As early humans became increasingly skillful, the sounds they made with their mouths became more controlled and meaningful. Grunting noises gradually changed into words. The need for improved voice control led to changes in throat design. These changes made it easier for them to choke while eating or drinking, but improved voice control outweighed this disadvantage.

The immediate advantage of improved communication led to stronger evolutionary pressure to learn more words and develop the creativity to string words together to form sentences. They were now able to learn more from each other and develop closer relationships by sharing personal experiences. And they could now cooperate much more effectively than ever before.

As cooperation between the sexes improved, the female body evolved more towards facilitating reproduction, while the male body evolved for more aggressive and physically demanding tasks such as hunting large animals and protecting the group. Women focused more on maintaining the camp, gathering and preparing food, and caring for family members.

Men and women were drawn together by shared interests and powerful sexual desires. The deeper emotional attachments that grow through familiarity then helped them stay together to share in the training of their children for adult life.

Human migration Early humans lived in family tribes that moved around the countryside following herds of wild animals and gathering different fruits as they came into season. They slept in caves or made simple shelters under trees. Clothes were made from animal skins. Hand axes were the all purpose tools. Warm clothes and effective weapons allowed them to slowly migrate to colder climates and less fertile environments.

They spread across Africa, Europe, and Asia in waves of migration that continued for hundreds of thousands of years. Each new wave either wiped out the previous inhabitants or interbred with them. Interbreeding had the advantage that any successful qualities of the new arrivals were combined with native adaptations that suited the local geography and climate. The results can be seen today. Modern humans all share similar abilities to our last common ancestor, but we come in a variety of shapes and colors.

The development of culture As speech gradually improved over the last hundred thousand years, people began to entertain each other with stories about things they had seen or heard. Casual conversations became an important force in shaping human behavior. People were forced to restrain themselves and show more respect for others. Wrongdoers would be shamed by the rest of the group. Over time, each tribe developed its own set of rules to reduce conflict in areas such as leadership, ownership, and sexual relationships.

Human consciousness was slowly awakening, but people had nothing more than their imaginations to help them understand their place in the world. They sensed powerful forces at work around them in the mountains, forests, rivers, seas, and in the sky. Some of these forces were kind and generous, others were unpredictable and destructive. They imagined these forces to have feelings and perceived them to be spirits or gods. Believing their lives to be at the mercy of these spirits, they prayed and offered sacrifices to gain their favor and avoid their anger.

Stories about the spirits helped to explain the various mysteries of nature. Often these stories were cleverly devised to promote good communal values and strengthen existing tribal laws. As the most popular myths and legends were passed down from generation to generation, they gained a kind of sacred authority. Many of them became the subjects of ritual songs and dances. People learned common values and gained a common understanding of the world through their shared mythology.

The development of language, laws, and customs marked a turning point in evolution. Evolution would now be more about evolving human cultures rather than evolving human brains. As cooperation improved between groups sharing similar cultures, hostility increased between groups with different cultures. People whose language, laws, and customs allowed them to organize into larger groups, better educate their young, and defend more territory, were more successful at preserving and spreading their culture.

Farming villages Over the last 2 million years, the earth has been frozen a number of times in what is commonly known as the ice ages. During these periods, many parts of the world became uninhabitable and much of the rest was only marginally productive. The last ice age began around 80 thousand years ago and receded only 12 thousand years ago. As the ice melted away, vast areas of land were revealed. Rivers of fresh water began flowing across fertile plains.

Around 10 thousand years ago, in some parts of the world, people began planting seeds and covering the countryside with food producing plants. The earliest and most successful crops were grasses with large seeds such as barley, wheat, and rice. These grasses were easy to grow, the seeds were high in protein, and they did not need to be eaten immediately. Grass seeds could be kept in storage for months or even years.

Early farming communities also began gathering herds of wild animals. Very few animals were suitable for farming. Most were too aggressive or too nervous to be kept on a farm. Farm animals needed to be easy to feed and have temperaments that were easy for humans to tame. The earliest farm animals were sheep and goats.

The change in lifestyle from hunting and gathering to farming was only made possible in those parts of the world where some wild grasses had large edible seeds, and where some wild animals were suitable for domestication. The river valleys to the east of the Mediterranean were among the first locations in the world to meet these requirements.

People living in the river valleys no longer needed to go searching for food. They had settled on land which could produce abundant quantities of food year after year. Land being farmed could produce hundreds of times more food than land being used to hunt and gather. Plentiful food supplies allowed populations to grow, and permanent farming villages began to appear.

As populations grew to become unsustainable, the farmers spread out and established settlements in nearby lands. With more food, larger populations, better organization, and superior technology, they quickly replaced any earlier inhabitants. Through the taking of slaves and by other means, the new arrivals would often absorb the native people and adopt aspects of their culture and language.

Farming villages were attractive targets for bandits who preferred to use force to take what they needed rather than produce it themselves. Communities could join together to establish a common defense, but they could not hold back larger invasions. Farms would eventually fall under the control of the most powerful bandit army. Successful bandit leaders rose to become regional warlords and kings. Kings maintained their power by fighting off rivals, marrying for alliances, and passing their kingdoms down to their sons.

Innovations such as plowing and irrigation allowed farmers to produce more food with less effort. Surplus food could be traded for clothes, tools, pottery, weapons, and other useful items. Farming villages became towns populated by specialists such as carpenters, merchants, and tailors. People would travel from miles around to trade their goods and services.

The Bronze Age Naturally occurring lumps of copper could be found in many parts of the world. This reddish brown metal was reasonably soft and could be beaten and shaped into tools, weapons, and ornaments. By around 3000 BC, it was discovered that melting copper and tin together formed a hard metal alloy called bronze. The durability of bronze and its ability to keep a sharp edge led to the development of more sophisticated tools and weapons.

The populations of some of the more fertile parts of the world began to climb into the hundreds of thousands. Towns grew into cities with marketplaces, courts, and temples. They were governed by royal families who ruled from stone palaces and were protected by armies of trained soldiers carrying bronze weapons.

Before the domestication of large animals, the only way for people to travel was on foot, and the only way to carry goods was on their backs. Now animals such as horses, donkeys, and camels were carrying large quantities over long distances in shorter periods of time. The invention of the wheel revolutionized transport. As horse drawn chariots became popular, towns began building stone roads and bridges.

The rise of empires Trade between kingdoms became essential. Most regions enjoyed at least one advantage in agriculture, mining, forestry, or the production of some other resource. Although greed for resources often led to conquest, nations that traded grew wealthy without the cost of war. New ideas were spread by traders who journeyed to foreign lands.

As the volume of trade grew, merchants needed to keep track of the amount of goods that were being traded. They began keeping records by making impressions in pieces of clay. Clay could be found almost anywhere and was already being used to make pottery. Markings on clay tablets could be easily erased or made permanent by baking them in brick ovens.

As the centuries passed, the markings on clay tablets became more complex and meaningful. New symbols with more abstract meanings allowed writing to be used for more than just trade and commerce. Professional scribes began to record laws, myths, and historic events.

Great wars and invasions were fought by expanding empires seeking to increase their wealth and power. The treasures of neighboring cities were seen as a particularly tempting prize for conquest. But the size of empires was limited by the speed of communication and travel.

Ancient temples Desperate to give meaning to their confused and often miserable lives, people listened to those who claimed to have special knowledge of the gods. Ancient priests became skilled in the art of crafting idols for the people to worship. Beyond calming people's fears and anxieties about the unknown, religions helped to bind early civilizations together under a common set of beliefs.

Priests worked with kings to prohibit unacceptable acts and promote family and community values. They performed sacred rituals such as crowning kings, sanctifying marriages, and burying the dead. Temples offered ambitious men an alternative path to power. Priests often helped to soften the cruelty of kings by forcing the palace to compete against the temple for the loyalty of the people.

The Iron Age Iron is one of the most common elements on earth, but it is rarely ever found in its pure metallic form. In ancient times, metallic iron could only be found in meteorites, making it much more valuable than gold or any other precious metal. Only royalty could afford to own weapons made of iron.

Around 1200 BC, people learned how to extract large quantities of iron by smelting iron ore in furnaces. Knowledge of iron spread rapidly through conquest with iron weapons. By 1000 BC, iron had become the chosen metal for tools and weapons throughout the ancient empires. Iron was stronger than bronze and its ore was much easier to find than copper or tin.

The art of writing In some parts of the world, the symbols used for writing changed to represent sounds instead of whole words. The invention of the alphabet allowed the written word to better reflect the power of speech. Animal skins and papyrus scrolls started to replace clay tablets. The first significant works of literature soon began to appear.

In the centuries that followed, the growing collection of writings continued to inspire new ideas and developments, while at the same time leaving behind a faint sketch of how history unfolded. As the growing populations struggled through wars, famines, and plagues, the battle for survival and the emergence of new ideas now came to depend increasingly on the discovery of new technologies.

Shattering the Sacred Myths - Chapter 3

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Advancing Technology

Traces the development of artificial intelligence and genetic engineering and contemplates the philosophical implications of consciously controlled evolution.

As we experience things through sight, sound, and touch, information about each experience is stored in our memories. Our brains work to understand new experiences by comparing them to memories of similar experiences from the past. Experiences that are recalled often are easily remembered, while the ones that are never recalled again are eventually forgotten.

Our brains are continually deciding what to do next by trying to predict the outcomes of our possible actions. When there are no previous experiences, or if the outcomes are uncertain, then the resulting confusion often leads to mistakes. We will usually only commit to an action when we are confident that it will result in a successful outcome.

We are typically motivated to do things to satisfy our needs, stimulate our senses, find the things that bring us pleasure, and avoid the things that give us pain. But our ability to think allows us to have more complex motivations like carrying out our responsibilities or following through with our plans.

Growing up As an infant, you observe other people using words and phrases to express their feelings. Young brains are especially good at remembering things. After learning to control your voice, and with the encouragement of your family, you begin using the same words and phrases to demonstrate your own feelings.

By spending time with your family and friends, you slowly learn the rules of social interaction. You start by learning not to bite, not to wander away from safety, and not to take things that do not belong to you. The rules may vary between different cultures but they are generally intended to guide your behavior in the family environment, and ultimately they help you to survive as an adult in a world where your success largely depends on what you learned as a child.

Beyond the characteristics that you inherit from your parents, the type of person that you grow to become is determined by your family relationships and by the culture in which you live. Your thoughts and feelings will be stimulated by what you see and hear. Each new way of thinking, and each new pattern of behavior that you learn as you grow older will become an additional part of your developing personality.

Your opportunities may be limited, but the choices that you make now, or the choices that are made for you by the circumstances of your life will determine the types of memories you accumulate, the skills you learn and practice, and the people that you come to depend on. The path of life that you travel down becomes harder to change as you grow older, but you are never too old to learn, and it is never too late to change.

Change Our lifestyles have changed more rapidly in the last few thousand years than in any other time during the billions of years over which we evolved. Evolution happens too slowly for our brain structure to have changed much since the Stone Age. It is surprising that our stone-age brains can cope with the increasing complexities of modern life. The pressures of the modern world cause many of us to suffer from stress, depression, and failure, and we all seem to be struggling to make sense out of what is happening in the world today.

Ten thousand years is the blink of an eye compared to the age of the earth, and yet in this period of time we have gone from building mud huts to building space stations. Over the last few centuries, the rate of technological change has been phenomenal. And yet because our generation has never known anything but rapid change, this change seems normal to us, we even become frustrated when the pace of change is too slow. Our expectations seem to be distracting us from seeing the significance of this change.

Some people see how modern transport, communication, and other luxuries improve the quality of our lives. Others fear the devastating potential of new weapons, destruction of the global environment, and the loss of cultural diversity. Some say that it is not technology that destroys, but rather the way in which we use it. In any case, competitive forces ensure that new technologies will always be exploited whenever they can be used to gain a military or economic advantage.

The real question is whether technological advancement comes purely from our creative potential and our determination to bend nature to our will, or whether the development of technology is just a continuation of the natural evolution of things. The competition for military superiority and higher profits is continuously driving new discoveries and inventions. Perhaps by continuing to develop technology in this way, we are merely carrying out our purpose in nature's scheme.

From steam power to electronics For thousands of years, clothing, pottery, weapons and other marketable products were made by hand in village workshops. Most of this work was done by skilled craftsmen using techniques that changed little over the centuries. Animal muscle power was harnessed to plough fields and transport heavy loads. The power of wind and running water had long been used to grind wheat grain.

Although steam power had been experimented with in ancient times, it was not until the late 1600s that improved techniques for working with metal made it possible to build the world's first steam powered machine. Steam was soon being used to power factories, and with steam power for cutting, hammering, and rolling sheet metal, the design of steam engines and other machines improved rapidly.

Steam powered machines could manufacture large quantities of high quality consumer goods for a fraction of the price of those made by hand. As cities became choked with the smoke from steam

powered factories, steam trains revolutionized land transport, and steamships traversed the rivers and oceans, opening up worldwide markets for factory produced goods.

Around the same time, inquisitive minds began experimenting with electricity and magnetism. One discovery led to another until by the late 1800s, power stations were generating electricity for streetlights, telephones were connecting homes and businesses, and electric motors were powering more sophisticated tools and manufacturing processes. The world was entering a new age of rapid technological change and economic growth spurred on by the mass production of consumer goods.

Petrol engines were soon powering cars and aircraft. Cities once drowning in chimney smoke and the decay of sewerage and horse manure were being transformed by street cars, electric stoves, and household plumbing. People were being dazzled by an onrush of new inventions, and there was a growing spirit of enthusiasm for progress and an optimism for the coming of a more enlightened age.

Military technology was also steadily improving, and by 1914, new weapons like long distance artillery, machine guns, iron battleships, and submarines were fuelling the ambitions of Europe's warlords. The eagerness of army generals to use these new weapons led to the devastation of the First World War. By the time the war was over, almost ten million men lay dead in the trenches of Europe, along with humanity's faith in progress and their hope for a better future.

Radio technology advanced rapidly during the war and radio stations were soon broadcasting news and entertainment into family homes. The invention of electronics was revolutionizing communication. By the late 1930s, television stations had begun transmitting motion pictures. Also by this time, the entire world had erupted into war again as hostile forces equipped with modern weapons like tanks and combat aircraft were sweeping across Europe, Africa, and Asia. Once again the world learned the destructive potential of new technology.

Computers Although mechanical calculating devices had been in existence for a long time, the first electronic computers were built during the Second World War to decode secret messages and calculate the trajectories of artillery shells. The first business computers became commercially available in the 1950s. Affordable desktop computers became a reality in the 1970s after the invention of the integrated circuit. The power of computers has since continued to increase exponentially.

Over the last few decades, the number of manufacturing jobs in the industrialized world has been declining as production processes have become increasingly automated. Meanwhile, the world economy has continued to enjoy long periods of unprecedented economic growth and prosperity.

There are now millions of robots working in factories around the world, assembling everything from cars to electric appliances. New applications for robots outside the factory are appearing every year, from robot vacuum cleaners to precision robot arms assisting surgeons with delicate operations. Unmanned space probes have been exploring deep space for decades, and sophisticated robot vehicles are now searching for signs of life on the surface of Mars.

Many of today's robots are custom built for work that is difficult or dangerous for humans, but general purpose robot arms are becoming increasingly popular. As they become less expensive, more adaptable, and easier to program, they will be able to manufacture a wider range of products with higher quality and lower cost than human workers. And they have the added advantage of accurately performing the same repetitive task without ever needing to rest.

Robots are increasingly replacing factory workers, and as more factories become automated, consumer goods will continue to improve in quality and decrease in price. Ultimately, businesses that do not employ robots will not be able to compete against those that do. Most consumer goods will eventually be produced with few or no human workers on the factory floor.

Over the last few decades, word processors, databases, and email have led to a huge increase in office productivity compared to telephones, typewriters, and filing cabinets. Increasingly sophisticated software packages are taking over the routine tasks of office management.

Advances in software technology have been so rapid that fully automated offices will soon begin reducing the need for office workers.

Modern economies operate like huge factories. Farms, mining operations, and industrial plants are like small pieces in a larger assembly line connected by trucks, trains, and ships. Raw materials are ordered and shipped into factories and finished products flow through warehouses and are distributed to shops. The whole process is powered by oil and electricity.

Higher profits from increased productivity are continually driving investment into greater automation. The world economy is becoming more integrated as suppliers and customers are increasingly being found through website advertising and online purchasing, and multinational corporations outsource production to countries with lower labor costs. Every year the world economy grows larger, more integrated, more efficient, and more productive.

Artificial intelligence Before the discovery of evolution, most people believed that our ability to think was a mystical experience that was somehow separate from the material world. Our souls were thought to be made of a heavenly essence. These days it is widely understood that our ability to think comes from the biological and psychological processes of the brain. These processes involve billions of brain cells working together with years of learning and experience to recognize patterns in the information carried into the brain from the senses.

Each nerve cell in the human brain works like a tiny chemical computer. A modern computer processor can process information millions of times faster than a single brain cell, but because a microprocessor can only process a single stream of information at a time, computers need to become another million times more powerful before they are able to recognize patterns as effectively as the billions of cells in the human brain can.

But the power of computers is rapidly increasing, and with new technologies like parallel processing, three dimensional chips, and photon computing, thinking computers are probably only decades away from becoming a reality. And unlike human brains, computers are precise in their calculations, and their memory does not fade over time.

Computers are already being programmed to understand speech, and computerized telephone services are using voice recognition to automate bookings and bill payments. As this technology continues to improve, natural sounding voices and a growing range of responses will make it increasingly difficult to tell the difference between a computer and a human operator.

Computer users can now type keywords into Internet search engines to find all of the available information on a particular subject. Future search technologies will be able to read through web pages, extract relevant words and phrases, and compile them into reports which provide the most accurate, readable, and direct answers to people's questions.

Many people do not believe that computers will ever be able to think like humans. They say that machines will only ever be tools for humans to use. But people who argue against the possibility of thinking computers are usually those who do not have a strong understanding of science and technology, or those who claim that human intelligence requires some kind of heavenly essence.

Denying the possibility of machine intelligence will not stop it from happening. The competition for military superiority and higher profits will ensure that this technology will be developed.

As computers continue to increase in power, we will become ever more dependent on the ease that they bring to our lives. As their power approaches the power of human thought, the assistance and companionship they offer should be warmly welcomed. And as they surpass us in the clarity and depth of their consciousness, as long as the technology is only ever used to our advantage, then the lifting of our burdens should come as an enormous relief.

Genetic engineering Another technology which is transforming our world is genetic engineering. The most common form of genetic engineering copies segments of DNA from one species of plant or animal and inserts them into another. Future generations then continue to carry the modification, leading to a new plant or animal variety.

Genetic engineering has the potential to make food producing plants grow faster, grow in less fertile areas, produce higher quality harvests, and be more resistant to weeds, diseases, and insects. But the techniques now being used are not very precise. Many attempts are usually required before the new plant or animal survives. Then several generations need to be observed to ensure that the organism has no deformities. It is almost impossible to be certain that there will be no long term negative impact on consumers or the environment until the plant or animal has already been released, and by then it is too late.

Unlike most other technologies, genetic engineering is too dangerous to allow mistakes. But mistakes have already been made, and some genetically modified plants have accidentally interbred with native varieties, causing genetic contamination that can never be repaired.

The worldwide protest against genetically modified food has been successful in forcing governments to impose strict laws and regulations. These prevent reckless biotech companies looking for short term profits from making mistakes that could threaten the safety of consumers or damage our already fragile environment.

But many governments continue to compromise on safety. The worst case is their failure to label food products containing genetically modified ingredients. Part of the reason for this is because contamination has already occurred, and it is now too difficult to determine the actual percentage of genetic modification in every day food products.

Nevertheless, many varieties of genetically modified plants and animals have been commercially successful, and the food that they produce has proven to be safe. New genetically modified foods are being approved for sale every year.

Cloning is another form of genetic engineering. The DNA from one animal is inserted into the egg of another. But current cloning techniques have a very low chance of success. Most clones fail to develop inside the mother, many die during pregnancy, and many also kill the mother. Those that survive usually die at birth, or are so deformed that they die soon after birth. Clones that survive long enough to breed often have genetic defects that are passed on to their young.

The most promising applications for genetic engineering are in medicine. The first breakthrough came in the early 1980s when a harmless bacteria was engineered to produce insulin for diabetics. Since then, hundreds of plants and animals have been successfully engineered to produce a wide range of medicines and vaccines.

Friendly viruses are now being engineered to infect and modify the DNA of specific cells so that the human body can produce its own medicine. As well as being able to prevent or cure almost every disease, genetic engineering has the potential to slow the aging process and extend the human lifespan well beyond its current limits.

Researchers have now created a map of the human DNA, and they are doing the same for other plant and animal species. The next step is to understand how each section of DNA works. Once this research has been completed, and scientists understand each step in the life cycle of plants and animals, and once computers become powerful enough to simulate the consequences of any changes to DNA, then humans will be able to safely engineer almost any imaginable type of plant or animal.

The risk of disaster caused by the misuse of genetic engineering is extremely high, but the potential benefits of proceeding in a safe and responsible way are astonishing. Once the tools and techniques have been perfected then all of the problems associated with food production can be solved, the world environment can be restored, and our human health and lifestyle will improve beyond imagination. There are almost no limits to what can be achieved through responsible genetic engineering.

Consciously controlled evolution Once genetic engineering technology has matured and is safe, then we will have the knowledge to begin changing our own DNA to make future generations stronger, smarter, and more resistant to disease. Human evolution is now entering a new phase where genetic engineering will allow parents to design their own children.

Should the genetic engineering of humans be banned? That depends on whether the emergence of a life form capable of engineering itself was simply an accident of nature, or whether the process of evolution is much more purposeful than we previously imagined.

Some evolutionary experts say that the only proper way to understand evolution is to think that it has no purpose or direction, but these people are expressing an opinion rather than stating a fact. They argue that random mutations made the evolution of intelligent life accidental, but it can also be argued that the tendency of natural selection to favor sharper senses and other beneficial traits made the outcome inevitable.

Science cannot prove whether or not there is any purpose behind evolution. The question of purpose is a philosophical one, not a scientific one. The prevailing view will depend more on persuasive arguments than on scientific evidence.

There is a general trend in evolution. Animals continue to evolve to become more competitive and resourceful than their ancestors, giving them a better chance of eating more, surviving longer, and outbreeding the competition. Charles Darwin wrote about this trend in the last line of his classic book on the theory of evolution ...

As natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all physical and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection.

After billions of years of evolution, the outcome of this trend on earth has been the rise of humankind and the discovery of advanced technology. Now it seems that the process of evolution is on the verge of accelerating as technology allows natural evolution to be overtaken by 'consciously controlled evolution'.

Perhaps the evolution of a humanlike consciousness was inevitable. Perhaps the discovery of advanced technology was also inevitable. And perhaps the inevitable use of technology to allow natural evolution to be overtaken by 'consciously controlled evolution' is part of some mysterious cosmic plan. Whether it was planned or not, it is happening now.

Because we are the first animals on this planet to build a civilization and discover technology, it is easy to think that we are the end product of evolution. Although we represent the first appearance of intelligent life, we are unlikely to be the last stage in its progression. From our understanding of genetic engineering and artificial intelligence, we can already predict the arrival of more advanced forms. And like countless generations before us, we seem helpless to stop ourselves giving birth to the next generation.

Chaos and chance Many people do not believe that there is any plan for the unfolding of events in this universe. They say that the evolution of intelligent life was purely an accident of nature and that we have no higher purpose. Many believe that the entire cosmos is just a mindless law-abiding machine that has either existed forever for no reason or else somehow sprang into existence like an island of order in a sea of meaningless chaos. Many believe that the laws of nature that govern this universe are simply the product of chance.

However, it is not enough to simply say that our existence is the product of chaos and chance, especially when everything in the observable universe, every particle of matter and wave of energy, is intricately structured and mathematically predictable, and the laws of nature that govern the universe are perfectly tuned to allow the evolution of intelligent life.

The only reasonable explanation that can be given, is to say that our laws of nature might only apply to this region of space. The laws of nature might be different in other parts of the universe, or perhaps they are different in other universes, or on other planes of existence. Some say that beyond this universe there exists an infinite multitude of other universes, each with its own unique variation in the laws of nature. Our universe is just one possibility.

According to this idea, the only reason that we are here is because our universe just happens to support all of the ingredients that were necessary for the evolution of intelligent life. It might be easy for us to fall into the illusion of thinking that this was how it was meant to be, because our

laws of nature are so perfectly tuned for life, and human consciousness is such a remarkable experience. But perhaps we are just the beneficiaries of incredibly good fortune.

The idea that our universe is just one of an infinite number of random variations is now so popular among scientists that many of them believe without any doubt that other universes do exist. Physicists around the world are committed to developing a workable 'multiverse' theory, and university science students now learn about the multiverse like it was a given fact that only needs to be proven.

Scientifically minded people generally like the idea of a multiverse because it implies that our mindless law-abiding universe exists within an even larger law-abiding system. While there might be some scientists who contemplate the possibility that the multiverse was created for a higher purpose by some kind of spiritual force, most scientists like the idea of a multiverse because it suggests that we were ultimately created by a thoughtless and purposeless process.

Despite the best efforts of some of the world's most brilliant minds, nobody has yet been able to show exactly how the idea of multiple universes might work. And it is an idea that raises more questions than it answers. For example, why are there an infinite number of universes? Is there an even higher process governed by orderly principles that brought them all into existence, or were they merely the accidental result of a mindless process driven by nothing more than unprincipled chaos?

More importantly, we have absolutely no evidence for the existence of other universes. And without any evidence, or even a plausible theory, the idea cannot be considered at this point in time to be anything more than science fiction. Although it is possible that we do live in a multiverse, we seem to be confined to the time and space of this universe, and so we may never be able to detect other universes anyway. This may be the only universe that we will ever know.

Most people who believe in multiple universes do so because they cannot accept the idea that there is any purpose to the existence of this universe, or any intention behind the evolution of intelligent life. And so instead they must have blind faith that this universe and everything beyond it was the product of chaos and chance and nothing more. The intricate arrangement of this universe and its suitability for the evolution of intelligent life can only be dismissed if it was just one of an infinite number of random variations.

Cosmic consciousness We each have our own individual thoughts and feelings. Although we may think of ourselves as being separate from the rest of the universe, this is a kind of illusion. Our bodies consist of atoms that are a part of this universe and these atoms carry our thoughts and feelings. It might be said that each one of us is like a small piece of the universe that has become aware of its own existence.

In a wider stretch of the imagination, as human civilization has been emerging from its dark past, painfully learning from its mistakes, slowly discovering the nature of things, and awakening into a more modern form of consciousness, the universe may have been awakening in some way through us. Perhaps intelligent life was meant to evolve as a way by which the universe can begin to perceive its own existence.

Perhaps humans are only one stage on the path to this awakening. Evolution has produced a global economy of working men and women, driven partly by selfish needs and desires, and partly by a sense of responsibility for the common good. While some industries profit from sustaining the population, other industries exploit the rapid development of new technologies.

Within a few generations of discovering how electricity works, many people are now connected to the global telecommunications and computing network. The electronics revolution was made possible by the special way that silicon atoms conduct electricity. Once we began experimenting with electricity, it was just a matter of time before we discovered how to make semiconductors. And so it could be argued that the evolution of intelligent life was always going to lead to the invention of the computer.

From the very first moment of the universe, it seemed inevitable that the stars and planets would

form. There are untold billions of planets in the universe and so the chances were very high that at least one planet would have the right conditions to support the evolution of life. Once life began to evolve, there must have been some chance that it could survive long enough to become intelligent and discover technology, otherwise we would not be here.

If humankind can survive the destructive potential of technology, then computers will continue to become so powerful that they eventually surpass human intelligence. In the hundreds, thousands, and millions of years to come, computers may provide the door through which an almost godlike depth of consciousness can manifest itself in the material universe. Perhaps such a deep consciousness might then be able to tell us the reason for our existence.

The existence of God Perhaps the atheists are right, and this universe is just a mindless cosmic machine that exists for no reason and no further explanation is required. Or perhaps the skeptical scientists are right, and beyond this universe there exists an infinite multitude of other universes, and beyond them lies a higher dimension filled with chaos from which randomly configured universes continually form.

But if consciousness does have some kind of cosmic purpose; if humankind was brought into existence by some purposeful creative process beyond space and time, a process that designed the universe and planned the events that led to the evolution of intelligent life, in other words, if there is some kind of God, then what can we know about this God?

Some people claim that God intervenes in human affairs, but apart from myth and superstition, there is absolutely no evidence that any supernatural event has ever occurred in the history of the universe. And there is no reason to suspect that any intervention would ever be necessary.

Myths about divine intervention might help some people to believe in the existence of God, but in the modern world, where science and religion must be in agreement, the existence of God should be explained without resorting to myths about miracles.

Most ancient religious scriptures describe God as having human qualities like goodness, love, mercy, and compassion. It is understandable that the authors of these scriptures needed to use concepts and imagery that were familiar to human experience in order to make it easier for their readers to form an agreeable mental image of God.

When people worship God while kneeling before a statue, it is understood that the statue is not God, the statue merely represents God. But what is the difference between using a carved image and using a written description which forms a mental image? In either case, an idol has been crafted to be worshipped in the place of an otherwise unknowable God. Attributing qualities like goodness or love to God is the same as crafting an idol using words.

Some people ask, "If God created the universe, then who created God?" This question presumes that the laws of logic that define the possibilities of this universe must also apply to any higher dimension beyond space and time, but there is no reason to believe that any of our concepts or understandings need to apply beyond this universe.

Most religions claim to know something about God's attributes, but then each religion disagrees with the other. And so we can safely assume that unless they have indisputable evidence, then anyone who claims to know any of God's attributes is probably misguided.

We interpret the world according to our beliefs. When a person's beliefs are misguided, then the way that their mind perceives the world will be different from how the world really is. Misguided religious beliefs can cause their believers to perceive only a fantasy world full of mythical delusions.

The irrational claims and unbelievable myths preached by the traditional religions, their refusal to accept established scientific truths, and a growing dissatisfaction with traditional religious morality are just a few of the reasons why many educated people today reject the notion of God.

For thousands of years, religious myths may have been useful for promoting social justice and preserving community and family values, but now they seem to be posing a serious threat to the

peace and prosperity of the modern world as they continue to be used by some opportunists to preach bigotry and oppression, provoke wars, and inspire terrorism.

If God does exist, then nothing can be known about God, other than that God is some unknown process behind the design and existence of the universe.

And if events in this universe are unfolding towards some kind of purposeful outcome according to some mysterious cosmic plan, then the only way for us to discover anything about this plan is to search for patterns in the unfolding of history.

Shattering the Sacred Myths - Chapter 4

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The History of Ancient Israel

The most probable history of ancient Israel from the Iron Age to the destruction of Jerusalem in the war against Rome.

We have now considered the possibility that there might be some kind of purpose behind the evolution of consciousness and the development of advanced technology. The next step of our journey will be to explore the last few thousand years of written history to see how the traditional religions and philosophies have answered the question of human purpose.

This will not be an easy thing to do. The problem with trying to explore the history of popular beliefs is that it can be difficult to navigate the most probable sequence of events between the myths of the priesthoods and the theories of the scholars. Sometimes the best that we can do is to make cautious speculations based upon a careful examination of what little evidence remains. Often it is not a matter of what can be proven, but rather what will be believed.

Not only do we need to show sensitivity and respect in order to appreciate the better qualities of each belief, we also need to have a certain bold honesty in order to expose the worst aspects of each belief. Not only boldness in the interpretation of events, but also a bold creative obligation to translate and arrange the words of each historical thinker to make their intended meanings as clear as possible.

The Sumerians One of the earliest known farming settlements in the world was situated in the Jordan River valley, east of the Mediterranean, around 8000 BC. These early farmers grew wheat and barley and raised sheep and goats. They produced an abundance of food, and as their population grew, they spread out looking for new lands to cultivate. Over the next few thousand years, farming communities spread north into Turkey, south into the Nile River valley of Egypt, and east into the river valleys of Sumeria.

The river valleys of Sumeria in modern day Iraq were ideal for growing crops. The land was fertilized by annual floods which deposited fresh layers of nutrient rich soil. Once farmers learned how to control the flooding by building embankments and digging canals, the land was able to produce enough food to support a large population. From around 3500 BC onwards, the number of people living in the region climbed into the hundreds of thousands, and population centers grew into cities.

The river valleys lacked many natural resources, so the Sumerians established trading colonies in the mountains to the north west. Raw materials such as stone, timber, and metals were transported downriver to be traded for agricultural products. In the centuries that followed, the wheel was invented, bronze became widely available, and the art of writing began as commercial transactions were being carved into clay tablets.

A number of cities were spread out over the river valleys of Sumeria. Each was ruled by its own

nobility of kings, priests, and wealthy land owners. Occasionally one city would become powerful enough to conquer its neighbors and form an empire, but such empires never lasted long. As distant trading colonies grew into independent cities, they sometimes became powerful enough to conquer the surrounding territory and form their own empires.

Defeated populations were often captured and taken away as slaves. Ancient economies depended on slave labor. Slaves worked as household servants, they worked in the fields and in the mines, and they were used as an inexpensive labor force to build roads, palaces, and temples. Slaves had a similar value to farm animals and were treated in much the same way.

Each city had its own patron god or goddess, and wars between the cities were often seen as battles between the gods. The Sumerians believed that they had been created by the gods to be their servants. They were powerless against the gods, having no choice but to worship and obey. Despite how much they prayed and sacrificed, they knew that the selfish and uncaring gods would continue to punish them with famines, plagues, and wars.

The Sumerians did not believe in reward or punishment after death. Instead they imagined a shadowy netherworld where the spirits of the dead ate dust and crawled on their bellies. These spirits might occasionally affect the living before they eventually faded into oblivion.

The Egyptians As Sumerian civilization was being worn down by wars and invasions, Egyptian civilization began to rise around 3000 BC. Egypt was protected from attack by the surrounding desert. The Nile River valley was more fertile than Sumeria, allowing two crops to be grown every year. Many aspects of Sumerian culture were adopted by the Egyptians. But unlike Sumeria, which was divided into a number of kingdoms, the whole of Egypt was eventually united under a single king.

The Egyptians believed in a number of gods and goddesses, some native to their culture, others borrowed from foreign lands. Different communities within the empire followed different religious myths. Most Egyptians recognized at least one god as being the creator of the world.

Many believed that as they passed into the afterlife, their deeds would be judged by the King of the Dead. The souls of the innocent would be guided to paradise, while the souls of the guilty would be torn to pieces by animal gods and would cease to exist.

Proverbs played an important role in Egyptian religion. These short statements about the meaning of life carried the ancient wisdom of the temple priests. Collections of Egyptian proverbs were preserved in writing on temple walls ...

Never believe a word without first putting its truth to the test; careful scrutiny is required by the seeker; understanding does not grow through laziness.

Men need symbols. Lacking them they will invent idols. It is better to base their symbols on realities that lead the true seeker to the source.

An answer brings no illumination unless the question has matured to a point where it gives rise to this answer, which thus becomes its fruit.

True teaching is not an accumulation of knowledge; it is an awakening of the consciousness which goes through successive stages.

Not even the greatest teacher can go one step for his student; the student himself must experience each stage of developing consciousness. Therefore he will know nothing for which he is not ripe.

Growth in consciousness does not depend on the potential of the intellect, but on the intensity of the inner urge.

Whatever you do does not matter so much as what you learn from doing it.

The Phoenicians In the writing systems of these early civilizations, each word or phrase was represented by a picture. As the centuries passed, the number of recognizable pictures grew to

cover hundreds of different words and phrases. Although much could be said using only a few pictures, because of the limited number of meanings that they represented, it was difficult to use them for much more than record keeping.

A group of people known as the Phoenicians emerged around 3000 BC as a colony of traders, cutting down trees in the mountains of Lebanon and shipping them downriver to Sumeria. They built cities and ports along the east coast of the Mediterranean and became skilled boat builders and navigators. Their ships traveled throughout the region, trading with distant lands including Egypt and Greece.

The Phoenicians had inherited writing from the Sumerians, and by around 1200 BC, they had refined the language from hundreds of symbols down to less than thirty. Each symbol now represented a different sound. The invention of the Phoenician alphabet allowed written words to better reflect the power of speech. The Phoenicians also acquired papyrus scrolls from the Egyptians. They were easier to write on and much easier to carry than clay tablets.

The area of land around modern day Israel was then known as the land of Canaan. The Canaanites shared a common culture with the Phoenicians and many of them shared a common heritage. Canaanite farmers worshipped many gods including Baal, the goddess of fertility, and they often held drunken orgies to call upon Baal to bring them rain.

The Philistines The sands along the coast of the Black Sea, north of Turkey, were rich in iron oxide. Around 1200 BC, the people living in this area learned how to extract large quantities of iron from the sand. Before long, the Mediterranean kingdoms were being invaded by armies of northern tribesmen. The invaders carried superior iron weapons and they attacked by both land and sea.

Northern warships sailed down the Mediterranean coast, destroying the Phoenician ports and cities along the way. The northern army marched through Canaan towards Egypt, ransacking towns and forcing villagers to flee into the desert. The invaders came with wagons carrying their families and possessions, and many of them settled in the vacant ruins.

The Egyptians had time to prepare for battle. They gained an advantage over the northern invasion fleet and it was destroyed as it sailed up the Nile River. But the land invasion was only stopped after a long and bloody battle. The invaders retreated back to the east coast of the Mediterranean, where they settled on fertile land and became known as the Philistines.

Mediterranean civilization was in ruins and regional trade had come to an end. Egypt had been saved from destruction, but the empire was critically weakened and soon collapsed into regional kingdoms. Masses of Egyptian slaves took advantage of the changing conditions to escape through the desert. Many of them eventually settled in the sparsely populated hill country of Canaan. These people became known as the Israelites.

The Canaanite cities were weak after centuries of being dominated by regional empires. The Israelites expanded their territory by capturing one town after the next. They existed as a loose federation of tribes until around 1050 BC when the Philistines invaded their territory. They responded to this threat by uniting under a common king and forming a national army. They then captured the city of Jerusalem and made it their capital.

Stories about gods It was widely believed by people in ancient times that their lives were at the mercy of a multitude of gods, each one looking after a particular aspect of life on earth or beyond. It was natural then for stories to be told about the relationships between these gods and about the way they intervened in the affairs of mortal men.

As the art of writing continued to improve, stories about the gods became wider in scope and richer in detail. Their popularity depended more on their ability to entertain than to inspire. Portrayals of selfishness, jealousy, and dishonesty between the gods did little to encourage good communal values and practices among the people.

Although stories about the gods may have impressed the majority of people, there would have

been some people who had difficulty accepting the common superstitions of their time. These people would have limited their concerns to the practical issues of daily life. Questioning the teachings of powerful priests has always been dangerous.

And there have always been people who believed that the whole of nature was governed by a single higher power. Ancient religions were generally able to accommodate such beliefs by having one particular god who reigned above all others, a god who was often described as being the creator of the world or the king of the other gods.

However, the majority of people had neither the instinct nor the education to contemplate the gods. They simply believed whatever they were told to believe by their priests, who made a comfortable living out of being knowledgeable about matters of religion.

The only significant difference between the Israelites and the other nations at the time was that the Israelite priests had begun to preach that there could be only one creator of the world and therefore only one true God. All other gods were denounced as mere idols not worthy of worship.

Having no other gods to interact with, the only stories that could be told about this god were stories about his relationship with his people. About how he was pleased when they honored him and angry when they disobeyed his commands.

Biblical scriptures The Israelites adopted a variation of the Canaanite alphabet and began writing down their historical myths. By around 700 BC, innovative priests had collected the best of these myths and woven them together to form a detailed history of the nation of Israel, intended to convince the Israelites that they were God's chosen people.

As new events unfolded, and as new interpretations of their history grew more popular, new scrolls gained acceptance into the common collection of religious literature. Papyrus scrolls had only a limited lifetime, and so any scrolls which fell out of favor were eventually lost and forgotten.

As the sacred scrolls were being copied or translated, successive generations were able to rework and refine the original myths and histories, incorporating into them new influences, and embellishing them with a greater degree of religious zeal and national pride.

What evolved over the centuries became something like a national constitution. Unlike any other literature at the time, it gave the Israelites a common culture, a comprehensive set of laws, a strong national identity, and a fierce emotional connection to the land.

The scriptures were so successful at preserving their cultural identity that even after thousands of years, their descendants continue to carry on their customs and beliefs. As a work of literature, it has had such a profound influence on other cultures that it now forms the basis for half of the world's religions.

Biblical mythology The mythology of Israel begins with God creating the heavens and the earth. God then creates mankind and gives him possession over the earth. This ancient myth was devised so thoughtfully and told with such authority that many people today still believe it to be true.

According to this myth, God chose a Sumerian man named Abraham, whose faith was so strong that his descendants were promised possession of the land of Israel. Generations of his family then continued to wreak havoc around the Middle East, getting themselves into trouble and then getting themselves out of trouble again, before finally becoming slaves to the Egyptians.

Many centuries later, another mythical hero named Moses supposedly led more than a million of Abraham's descendants out of slavery in Egypt. After surviving in the desert for some time, they returned to the Promised Land, massacred its inhabitants, and were given a system of laws, traditions, and values. The rest of the scriptures cover the unfolding history of Israel.

Early history United by their commitment to God, they battled for centuries against enemy states and invading hordes. The underlying theme is that when the people remained united by

their faith in God then they prospered and defeated their enemies. But when they abandoned their faith in God, and when they were led by kings who were driven only by the desire for personal wealth and power, then the people became divided by civil war and were conquered by their enemies. The early scriptures say ...

Follow after none of the other gods of the people who dwell around you, lest the Lord's anger blaze out fiercely against you and wipe you off the face of the earth, for the Lord your God is a jealous God. Seek to do all that is good and right in the Lord's sight, so that you may prosper and enter into possession of the good land which the Lord has promised to your fathers, to clear it of all who oppose you, as the Lord has commanded.

Do not make idols for yourselves, nor set up carved images, nor erect stone sculptures for the people to worship, for I am the Lord your God. If you practice my commandments then I shall grant you seasonal rain, the land shall produce crops, and the trees shall bear fruit. You shall eat well and live in safety. I will chase away your enemies who will fall before you by the sword.

But if you do not listen to me, then I shall turn against you and you will be defeated by your enemies. Your land will not produce crops nor will your trees bear fruit. I will destroy your livestock and unleash wild beasts into your fields. I will tear down your altars and pile your corpses upon your broken idols. I will turn your cities into ruins, and so thoroughly lay waste to your land that your enemies who settle on it shall be astonished.

Around 930 BC, political differences forced the population to divide into the northern state of Israel, and the southern state of Judah. The people living in the southern state became known as the Jews.

The two states continued to endure civil wars and foreign invasions until around 720 BC, when the northern state was conquered by the Assyrian Empire. The defeated Israelites were taken away as slaves and no longer appeared in history. They became known as the lost tribes of Israel.

The Jews had been told by their ancient prophets that their forefathers had made a pact with God. As long as they continued to obey his commands then God would protect them. And so each time disaster fell upon them they were told by new prophets that they were being punished for their disobedience to God.

Babylonian Exile Around 590 BC, the Babylonian Empire conquered the southern state of Judah. Most of the population were taken away as slaves. This experience had a profound effect on the development of the Jewish religion. New scrolls were written and many of the older scrolls were changed. The Jewish scriptures were beginning to take their final form. The following lines were added to the book of Isaiah ...

Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as specks of dirt on the scales. God weighs the lands as though they were fine dust. Before him all the nations are as nothing. They are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing. He brings princes to nothing and their judgments soon pass away. No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

Why do you complain, O Israel, "The Lord does not notice me; my cause is ignored by my God?" Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. He never grows tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall, but those who have faith in the Lord will renew their strength. They will fly like eagles, they will run and never grow tired, they will continue and never give up.

Around 550 BC, a Persian prince named Cyrus conquered the Babylonians and created an empire that eventually stretched from Greece to India. He became known as Cyrus the Great, not only for his success in war, but also for his unprecedented tolerance and generous attitude towards those

he defeated. His accomplishments were recorded on a clay cylinder ...

I am Cyrus, king of the world. When I entered Babylon, I established my government in the royal palace amidst jubilation and rejoicing. I did not allow anyone to terrorize the land. I freed the people of Babylon and put an end to their misfortunes. The holy cities in faraway lands whose temples were destroyed in the distant past, I restored their temples and gave them back their gods. I have gathered all of the displaced people and sent them back to their homes. The Great God has delivered all of the lands into my hands, and these lands shall now dwell in peace.

Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to their homeland, although many chose to stay in Babylon. Israel was now a province of the Persian Empire.

The Persians had been developing their own religion based on the teachings of a prophet known as Zoroaster. Zoroaster believed that there was a battle raging in heaven between the god of goodness and light, and the god of darkness and evil. When goodness finally defeats evil, there will be a day of judgment. The dead will be resurrected and the guilty will burn in hell. Zoroaster's ideas influenced the development of many other religions in the region up to and including the rise of Christianity and Islam.

The Apocrypha Around 330 BC, the Greeks under Alexander the Great conquered the Persians and established the Greek Empire. Judah became known as Judea, and for the next few hundred years it was governed by the descendants of Alexander's generals.

The Jews participated in the Greek invasion of Egypt, and as a reward, they were allowed to settle in the Egyptian city of Alexandria. Influenced by Greek culture, the majority of Alexandrian Jews learned to speak Greek instead of Hebrew. In order to preserve their religion, the Jewish scriptures were translated into Greek. This translation was painstakingly compiled over the last few centuries BC.

Some of the scriptures that were translated into Greek had only been written in recent centuries, and although the Greek speaking Jews considered them to be sacred, they were not accepted as sacred by the Jews living in Judea. These controversial books have since become known as the Old Testament Apocrypha.

When Christianity first appeared, the early churches used the Alexandrian Greek translation of the Jewish scriptures as their Old Testament. The additional books of the Apocrypha were accepted by the early church as an integral part of the Bible.

After the Protestant churches split away from Catholic control around the 1600s, book publishers in Protestant countries like England and Germany removed the Apocrypha to reduce the size of the Bible and save on printing costs. The removal of the Apocrypha was encouraged by the Protestant bishops.

The Apocrypha still appears in many Catholic and Greek Orthodox editions of the Bible. One of the Apocryphal books is called Ecclesiasticus. It was written around 200 BC and translated into Greek around 130 BC. In the book of Ecclesiasticus, it says ...

When an intelligent person hears a wise saying, he praises it and adds to it; but when a fool hears it, he laughs at it and throws it away. In the treasures of God's wisdom there are many wise sayings, but God's wisdom is an abomination to the sinner. The knowledge of wickedness is not wisdom, nor is there good sense in the advice of sinners. For great is the wisdom of the Lord. He is mighty in power and sees everything. And he does not command anyone to be wicked.

Perform all your tasks with humility. The greater you are, the more you must humble yourself, so that you will find favor in the sight of the Lord. Do not praise yourself, or you may fail and bring dishonor upon yourself. The Lord will reveal your secrets and dishonor you before the whole community, because you did not come in fear of the Lord, and your heart was full of deceit.

Do not say, "I have sinned, and yet nothing has happened to me", for the Lord is slow to anger. Do not be so confident of forgiveness that you add to your sins. Do not say, "His mercy is great, he will forgive the multitude of my sins", for both mercy and wrath are in him, and his anger will fall upon sinners.

Do not become a beggar by feasting with borrowed money when you have nothing in your purse. A rich person will exploit you if you can be of use to him, but if you are in need he will abandon you. Riches are only good if they are free from sin. Poverty is only evil in the opinion of the ungodly.

Do not cheat the poor out of their living. Do not add to the troubles of the desperate, or delay giving to the needy. Do not let your hand be stretched out to receive, and closed when it is time to give. Do not avert your eyes from the needy, or give them a reason to curse you. For if in bitterness, some of them should curse you, then the Lord may hear their prayers. The compassion of human beings is for their neighbors, but the compassion of the Lord is for every living thing.

Let those who are friendly with you be many, but let your advisers be one in a thousand. When you gain friends, gain them through testing, and do not trust them hastily. For there are friends who are such when it suits them, but they will not stand by you in times of trouble. And there are friends who will change into enemies and talk about you to your disgrace.

Keep away from your enemies and be on guard with your friends. Faithful friends are a sturdy shelter, whoever finds one has found a treasure. Do not abandon old friends, for new ones cannot equal them. A new friend is like new wine; when it has aged, you can drink it with pleasure.

Love your friend and keep faith with him; but if you betray his secrets, then do not follow after him. For a wound may be bandaged, and there is reconciliation after abuse, but whoever has betrayed secrets is without hope.

Do not reveal your thoughts to anyone. The mind of a fool is in their mouth, but the mouth of the wise is in their mind. The wise make themselves loved with only a few words, while all the loving words of a fool are wasted.

Do not find fault before you investigate, examine first and then criticize. Never speak against the truth, but be ashamed of your ignorance. Do not be ashamed to confess your sins. Fight to the death for the truth and the Lord God will fight with you.

Listen to me, and in the end you will appreciate my words. Like a drop of water from the sea, or a grain of sand on the beach, so are our years among the days of eternity. Do not deprive yourself of a day's enjoyment, and do not let your share of desired good pass you by. Reflect on the statutes of the Lord, and meditate at all times on his commandments. It is he who will give you insight into your mind, and your desire for wisdom will be granted.

Destruction of Jerusalem The Jews were allowed to maintain their own religion until around 175 BC when a Greek king entered the temple in Jerusalem and offered sacrifices to the Greek god Zeus. He then outlawed Jewish customs and crucified anyone who resisted.

Greek power in the region soon collapsed under the weight of civil wars and foreign invasions. The Jews overthrew the Greeks in Judea and remained independent for the next hundred years.

Men who aspired to become biblical prophets continued to write new religious scriptures. Some writings predicted the end of the world or the coming of a messiah. Other writings preached a more enlightened form of morality.

The Roman army entered Jerusalem around 65 BC. From this time onwards, the Romans steadily increased their control over Judea.

Under the reign of emperors like Caligula and Nero, Rome installed governors who were so corrupt and oppressive that in the year 66, the Jews rose up in open revolt against them. Rome reacted

by sending an army into Judea. The war lasted several years, millions of Jews were slaughtered, and many of the survivors were sold into slavery.

After a second rebellion in the year 132, the Jews were banished from ever returning to Judea. What remained of their culture was then kept alive by the millions of Jews living in foreign lands, scattered across Europe, Asia, and North Africa.

Judea was renamed Palestine by the Romans in honor of Israel's hated ancient enemy, the Philistines. Greeks and Arabs moved onto the land and it remained a part of the Roman Empire until the rise of Islam around 500 years later.

Shattering the Sacred Myths - Chapter 5

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Ancient Greek Philosophy

The history of Greek and Roman philosophy leading up to the rise of Christianity.

By around 7000 BC, farming settlements had begun to appear in the area of land now known as Turkey. After settling along the coast, some groups sailed across the water, carrying their domesticated plants and animals with them, to settle on the islands between Turkey and Greece. By 5000 BC, they had established a colony on the large southern island of Crete.

By 2800 BC, settlements on Crete had grown into cities with huge stone palaces. The roads were paved and the palaces had running water and sewers. Palace guards carried bronze weapons, and beautiful paintings decorated the palace walls.

Crete was a safe distance from the mainland. Its towns did not need defensive walls and its people lived in relative peace. Its naval power dominated the surrounding seas, and it rose to become a regional center for trade and commerce. The people of Crete established colonies on nearby islands, and by around 2000 BC, they had begun building stone palaces and fortified cities along the southern coast of Greece.

From around 1500 BC, a series of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions devastated the island of Crete. The palaces were damaged and most people abandoned the island and moved to the mainland. Regional power moved to the southern cities of Greece and remained there for the next few hundred years.

Around 1200 BC, the Bronze Age empires of the Mediterranean were invaded by northern tribes armed with iron weapons. The invaders attacked by both land and sea. The Greek island colonies were conquered and the cities of southern Greece were seriously weakened.

In the years that followed there were widespread peasant rebellions and civil wars. Kingdoms collapsed, many of them disappearing forever. Years of war and famine took a huge toll on the population. Regional trade came to an end and the art of writing was largely lost. The entire region fell into a dark age that lasted for hundreds of years.

Homer By around 900 BC, conditions had settled down and the population was growing again. Greek traders re-established links with the other Mediterranean civilizations. Increased trade and travel led to new influences being introduced into Greek culture. The Greeks adopted the Phoenician alphabet and modified it to suit their own language.

The Greeks had been passing down stories by word of mouth about a golden age before the fall of civilization. These legends described the heroic adventures and epic battles fought by ancient Greek warriors and kings. The great fortresses around which these battles were fought were still visible as ancient ruins.

The telling of these stories was a popular form of entertainment. Over the centuries, storytellers added increasing degrees of fantasy to make the stories sound fresher and more interesting. Eventually they became myths that only vaguely resembled the actual events.

Around 800 BC, an obscure poet, known only as Homer, composed two of the earliest and most influential pieces of Greek literature. Homer's books contained many of the popular myths and legends from the golden age of Greece woven together to form epic adventure stories.

These books became immensely popular and had a profound effect on the Greeks, giving them a historical identity and a sense of national pride. They helped to standardize the Greek language and they encouraged people to learn how to read. Children from wealthy families were taught to read these books as part of their education.

The Greek Gods Homer's books also helped to strengthen the foundations of Greek religion. The major players in Homer's stories were the Greek gods. The gods depicted by Homer acted selfishly and were driven by emotions such as favoritism and jealousy. They behaved like ordinary people except they were immortal and had supernatural powers.

The Greek gods also personified the forces of nature. Zeus was the king of the gods and the god of the sky. There was the earth goddess, the sun god, and the god of the sea. Minor gods had special functions like the goddess of love and the god of war. Gods were used to explain everything from human emotions to changes in the weather.

As the collection of religious writings grew over the centuries, the portrayal of the gods became more mature and purposeful. They became dispensers of justice, rewarding the good and punishing the wicked. Moderation and self-control were judged to be good. Pride, arrogance, and unbridled ambition caused the gods to act to bring about the eventual downfall and disgrace of a person.

Greek religion had no central organization. Instead there were several holy places where temple priests interpreted the wishes and opinions of the gods for those who asked and could afford to pay. Prayers and sacrifices to the gods were usually offered by individual families in front of common household shrines.

Athens The sophistication of the Greek language and the widespread use of writing led to improvements in Greek government. Written constitutions allowed governments to depend less on the rich and powerful imposing their will, and more on developing and refining written laws which clearly defined people's rights and obligations.

Like other Greek cities at the time, the city of Athens adopted a written constitution around 620 BC. The city's first constitution favored wealthy landowners and resulted in many peasant farmers being enslaved by debt. The first set of laws were criticized as having been written in blood, as the penalty for every crime was death.

Around 590 BC, a visionary statesman named Solon was brought to power in Athens by a peasant rebellion. His first task was to rewrite the constitution. His new laws curbed the power of the wealthy and empowered the citizens by allowing them to elect government officials. Solon wrote a poem about the importance of a good constitution ...

Never will our city be destroyed by the will of the gods, for we are guarded by the wise goddess Athena. But the Athenians themselves, seduced by money, seek mindlessly to corrupt this great city. Helped by the evil schemes of their leaders, whose arrogance shall make them suffer, for they do not know how to restrain their greed nor be discreet in their feasting.

Sparing neither sacred ground nor public property, greedily they steal from one place or another. Athena notes quietly and in time she exacts her retribution. Behold the destruction of our city as vile slavery awakens civil strife. War wipes out for many their cherished youth. Our much loved city is worn down by violence as the wicked stir them into confrontation. The poor are shackled and sold as slaves to foreign lands.

My soul commands me teach the Athenians that a bad constitution brings civic turmoil, but a

good one brings order and strengthens community. It shackles wrongdoing and smooths out the rough. It checks greed, tempers arrogance, and withers the fruits of reckless impulse. It takes crooked judgments and makes them straight, halts treasonable acts, and ends the poison of violent conflict. And so under it, everything for mankind becomes whole and wise.

Solon's system of government was refined over the next hundred years to include independent judges and citizen juries. The Athenian constitution formed the basis for a democratic government in which ultimate power was held by an assembly of tens of thousands of male citizens.

Wealthy landowners were never happy with this arrangement, and some of them secretly conspired with foreign dictators and patiently waited for an opportunity to regain control. Meanwhile, slavery continued to power the Greek economy. Unskilled manual labor was considered to be beneath the dignity of a free man. Liberated from the need to do work, some men chose to spend their days in thoughtful contemplation, reading and writing.

Greek science Greek thinkers began speculating about the nature of the universe. Unconvinced by religious explanations, they believed that through observation and clear thinking, they might be able to find natural rather than supernatural explanations for the workings of the world.

One early thinker named Anaxagoras claimed that lightning was caused by clouds being split by gusts of wind rather than thunderbolts hurled by Zeus. Growing freedom of speech and the lack of any powerful priesthood allowed people to openly express such views.

It was commonly believed at the time that the world was composed of four basic elements: earth, water, wind, and fire. But by carefully observing nature, it could be seen that there were in fact a large number of different elements, and by around 400 BC, it was commonly believed that these elements existed as indivisible particles called atoms.

Some Greek thinkers wrote that nothing could be known for certain because everything changes over time. Others wrote that nothing ever changes, there is only one infinite, eternal, and indivisible reality, despite our senses presenting us with the illusion of a changing world.

Some believed the universe to be infinite and eternal, others suggested that it grew like a seed from boundless chaos. Many believed that there was a more abstract reality that existed beyond what our senses can perceive. One early thinker named Pythagoras suggested that this ultimate reality was based upon mathematical relationships.

Each new generation of thinkers enthusiastically challenged the speculations of the previous generations. No idea was too sacred to be questioned.

Religious morality Although there was no powerful priesthood, the conservative political establishment supported traditional religion as a source of moral guidance for the community. Speculation about the workings of nature caused people to question the existence of the gods, thereby undermining religious morality. Many of the early Greek thinkers were prosecuted by the conservatives on the charge of corrupting the public morals, and many were either sent into exile or killed.

One early thinker named Xenophanes claimed that the gods and goddesses were merely human inventions. He asked why he should continue to worship gods who displayed such bad manners, questionable morals, and childish emotions. He instead suggested believing in one greater god who did not resemble mortal men in either body or mind. Some Greeks in later centuries used the name Zeus to represent such a god.

Schools in Athens Democracy in Athens was frequently interrupted by periods of dictatorship. The city was growing enormously wealthy, with a powerful navy and a fleet of trading ships. Meanwhile, the Persian Empire had been expanding westward and capturing Greek colonies. Athens maintained a balance of war and diplomacy with its neighboring cities until around 490 BC, when all of Greece was forced to unite against an invasion by the Persians.

The wealth and freedom of Athens attracted educated people from around the region. Schools began opening where professional teachers lectured on a variety of subjects including law,

politics, and commerce. Practical skills were considered to be more valuable to students than philosophical questioning. In any case, teachers widely believed that the hidden workings of the universe might never be known. Anything beyond what the senses can perceive is merely opinion.

But the fears of the conservatives were soon realized when schools began teaching that there were no absolute truths and no universal standards for judging human behavior. It was said that ideas about right and wrong either developed through social progress or were determined by those in power. In any case they changed over time.

It was also said that the only kind of knowledge that has any real value is the kind that leads to material success. A practical education in law, politics, or commerce is not about being truthful, but rather about using persuasive arguments to convince other people to believe your opinions. Some schools even taught that personal ambition is more valuable than the welfare of the community.

Socrates Although many Greek thinkers were denying the existence of absolute truths and values, philosophers like Plato were trying to explain how they might actually exist. Plato believed that the best way to justify important human values like justice and goodness was to think of them as being reflections of eternal truths that existed in a heavenly dimension.

Plato's books are among the earliest and best preserved works of moral philosophy. They were often written as debates between people with differing points of view. The main character in the debates was usually Plato's old friend and mentor, the legendary Socrates.

Socrates wanted people to think about what they believed rather than just blindly accepting whatever was passed down to them by tradition or told to them by figures of authority.

He said that the secret to being wise was to realize that we really do not know much. Everybody wants to think that what they believe is right, and they cling to the beliefs that they are familiar with, even when they do not fully understand the issues. It takes a great deal of humility to admit the limits of your knowledge.

He taught that by asking the right questions, and then subjecting the answers to further examination, agreement could eventually be reached about the highest standards for human thought and behavior. He was notorious for stopping people in the street and questioning what they believed.

Socrates was eventually accused by the conservative establishment of undermining people's belief in the traditional gods of the city, and thereby corrupting the morals of the young. By a slim majority, a jury of 500 citizens condemned him to death. Plato wrote an account of his trial in which Socrates said to the jury ...

Supposing that you were to say to me, "Socrates, this time we shall disregard the testimony and acquit you, but only on one condition - that you give up this quest and stop philosophizing. If we catch you again carrying on in the same way, you shall be put to death."

Well, supposing that you were to offer to acquit me on these terms, I would reply, "My fellow Athenians, although you have my deepest respect and admiration, I am more deeply devoted to my God than I am to you, and so as long as I draw breath, I will never stop practicing philosophy and questioning ideas and pointing out the truth to everyone that I meet."

I shall continue to say, in my usual way, "My dear friend, as a citizen of Athens, the greatest city in the world, famous for its wisdom and its strength, are you not ashamed that you devote yourself to acquiring as much wealth as possible, and similarly striving after position and fame, and yet you give no attention to truth and understanding and the perfection of your soul?"

And if any of you disputes this and claims that he does care about such things, then I will not leave him alone, but shall question him and examine him and put him to the test, and if it seems to me that in spite of what he says, he has made no real progress towards goodness, then I shall lecture him for neglecting what is of supreme importance, and giving his attention

to trivial matters instead. And I will do this to everyone that I meet, young or old, foreigner or fellow citizen, but especially to you my fellow citizens, as you are closer to me in kinship.

This, I do assure you, is what my God commands. And it is my belief that no greater good has ever come to you in this city than my service to my God, for I spend all of my time going about trying to persuade you, young and old, to make your primary concern not for your bodies or for your possessions, but for the highest welfare of your souls. And I will say to you, "Wealth does not bring goodness, but goodness brings wealth and every other blessing, both to the individual and to the state."

The teachings of Socrates influenced a generation of thinkers in Athens, but he never wrote anything down. Most of what we know about him comes from the writings of Plato, and so it is difficult to know how many of his ideas were actually Plato's.

Plato established a school called 'The Academy' in Athens in 390 BC. His mission was to educate politicians and improve the quality of government. He believed that the main purpose of good government was to shape the moral character of its citizens, inspiring them to be committed to the welfare of the state. He did not believe in democracy, but instead believed that only philosophers have the wisdom to govern in the best interests of the people. Plato's school remained open for the next 900 years.

One of Plato's students was Aristotle, who was later employed to teach Alexander the Great, who went on to conquer Persia and Egypt and establish the Greek Empire. Aristotle later opened his own school of philosophy in Athens.

Aristotle believed that knowledge about the universe and about human nature could only be gained through the careful study of nature and the painstaking collection and organization of facts. He was suspicious of any ideas that did not come from experience and common sense.

Aristotle's books summarized the scientific and ethical ideas of his time. Although most of his conclusions have since been replaced by newer discoveries, his writings remained an inspiration to scientific thinkers until the beginning of the modern age.

Philosophy Greek philosophers had begun to ask the ultimate questions. What is the universe made of and where did it come from? Do gods exist? If so then do they interest themselves in human affairs? How do we think? Why do we exist? And what happens to us after we die?

Greek philosophy grew to replace traditional religion as the educated person's guide to truth and morality. Even our relationship with the gods became the domain of the philosopher, not the priest. Religion had lost its moral authority and now only existed to perform ceremonies to appease the gods.

Epicurus An influential thinker named Epicurus established his own school of philosophy in Athens around 310 BC. Epicurus believed that everything in the universe has a natural explanation. His philosophy grew to become one of the most popular beliefs in the Greek and Roman empires, and it remained popular for centuries.

According to Epicurus, the universe is infinite and eternal, and everything in the universe is made up of fundamental atomic particles. Even living things are made up of particles, and it should be possible to explain the mind and its senses through the interactions between these particles.

Everything happens according to the laws of nature, and not because of the divine will of any gods. Epicurus did not deny the existence of gods, because nature seems to have planted the idea of them firmly in the minds of men. But there is no divine intervention or any other act of God, and there is no divine purpose or any other religious objective. We have no other significance beyond that which we give ourselves.

He said that if the gods listened to the prayers of men, then all of humankind would quickly perish, because people seem to be eager pray for each other's destruction.

Epicurus said that there was no life after death. People are made up of atoms that are dispersed

into nature when they die. When the body dies, so does the mind. This is the only life that we have, so we must try to live it as happily as possible.

All that is needed for happiness is a life among friends, a body free from pain, and a peaceful mind. Living honestly brings the greatest peace of mind, and a correct understanding of nature can help free a person from needless fears and anxieties.

He said that happiness can be gained by pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain. But always consider the consequences of pursuing pleasure, because some forms of pleasure result in a pain which is many times greater than any pleasure to be gained. And all things are best enjoyed in moderation.

He said that it was wrong to think that just because life had no meaning that people would have no price to pay for the things they did. People are called to account throughout their lives by the judgments of others, or by the fear of being found out.

In the centuries following the death of Epicurus, some of his followers began to preach self-indulgence. They believed that we should abandon our restraints and live for the moment. The word 'Epicurean' came to describe someone who lived only for pleasure.

As the Greek Empire declined and the Roman Empire expanded, Epicureanism was gradually replaced by Stoicism as the most influential philosophy in the region.

Stoicism The name 'Stoic' came from the Greek word which described the public place in Athens from which Zeno began to teach his philosophies around 300 BC. Zeno's work was carried on by a succession of thinkers, and their collective efforts produced a philosophical system that attempted to embrace "all things divine and human".

The Stoics believed in a supreme power, which could be described in any number of ways according to choice or context. Descriptions included 'the universe', 'nature', 'destiny', 'fate', 'providence', 'the divine will', 'god', or as a concession to traditional religion, 'the gods'.

They saw the entire world as a single community in which all men were brothers. They believed that we are all part of nature's scheme, and although we are unable to perceive our place in this scheme, it is our duty to fulfill our purpose and cooperate with nature by living virtuously.

They believed that the path to happiness is to pursue virtue, not pleasure. Virtue appears as all of the admirable qualities of character, such as honesty, generosity, courage, and self-control. Happiness comes from the high quality of life that you will experience as the result of your virtuous behavior.

The Stoics saw no need to believe in reward or punishment after death, as virtue in this life was seen as its own reward and vice as its own punishment.

They believed that they only needed the basic necessities of life. They did not set too high a value on things that could be taken away from them at any moment. They had no time for greed or ambition and they did not seek to live in luxury.

They believed that our ability to reason separates us from the animals. Reason is a divine essence and it connects us with God. Our powers of reason should be strong enough to overcome physical pain, emotional suffering, and the fear of death.

With some effort, you can learn to control your passions and desires and take complete control of your emotional life. And with realistic expectations, you should be able to resign yourself without any complaint to whatever your fate may be.

Stoic philosophy was said to be like a living animal, with logic as its bones, physics as its flesh, and ethics as its soul.

The influence of Stoicism increased steadily over the centuries. The Romans were particularly attracted to Stoicism because it promoted justice, bravery, seriousness, self-discipline, and self-sacrifice; qualities that were admirably suited to the Roman character.

Despite being a philosophy, Stoicism became the religion of educated men and women throughout the Roman Empire. It influenced all of the better aspects of Roman culture, from progressive government to classic literature.

However, it failed to convince everyone. Many saw it as being too rational, unemotional, and placing too high an expectation on their behavior. The spiritual hunger of the masses was not satisfied by philosophy but by religious cults.

Rome

For thousands of years, a steady stream of settlers had been navigating their way through the mountain ranges north of Italy. They were attracted by the mild climate and fertile soil of the Italian peninsula. The northern mountain ranges had long provided a natural barrier against any large scale invasions, and the dense forests prevented the appearance of any significant settlements before the invention of the iron axe.

By around 800 BC, the population of Greece had grown to become unsustainable. Greek migrants were looking for new lands to settle across the sea. Hundreds of colonies were established along the southern coast of Italy, eventually forming an area of land which became known as Greater Greece.

The city of Rome was built on the Tiber River in central Italy. The river allowed convenient transport to the sea. Rome's hills provided a good defensive position against enemy attacks. The surrounding land was fertile and provided plenty of building materials. Around 500 BC, Rome overthrew its king and adopted a democratic constitution.

The Romans eventually subdued the Greeks in southern Italy and extended their influence across the entire Italian Peninsula. They adopted the Greek alphabet and modified it to suit their own distinct Latin language. They also adopted Greek art, religion, and philosophy.

The Phoenicians had long been establishing colonies throughout the Mediterranean. The city of Carthage on the north coast of Africa had become their capital. From around 270 BC, Rome was drawn into a series of brutal wars with Carthage which continued for more than 120 years. By the time Carthage was captured and reduced to rubble, Rome had grown to become the dominant military force in the Mediterranean region.

The government of Rome was practical and efficient and its army was highly trained and well equipped. As the Romans rid themselves of hostile neighbors, and as they were called upon by friendly neighbors to settle regional disputes, they gradually expanded their area of influence across the remnants of the old Greek Empire.

Wherever the Romans went, they established a common law, common language, and common currency. They built roads, bridges, aqueducts, and irrigation channels. They constructed luxurious villas with heated floors and heated baths. And in the towns and cities they built temples, theatres, and stadiums.

The spread of Roman civilization was best described at the time by the Roman historian Tacitus ...

Native populations, scattered and barbarous and inclined to war, were made accustomed to peace and leisure through the charms of luxury.

Private encouragement and public aid was given to the building of temples, courts of justice, and stately dwellings. The industrious were praised and rewarded and the lazy were criticized. Thus honorable rivalry took the place of forced labor.

The sons of the chiefs were given a liberal education, and those who once disdained the language of Rome now coveted its eloquence. They even took a liking to our style of dress, and the 'toga' became fashionable.

Step by step they were led to things of idle decadence - the lounge, the bath, the elegant banquet. All this in their ignorance they called civilization, when it was but a part of their servitude. And so, the gullible natives eventually came to call their slavery 'culture'.

Roman emperors During the last century BC, it became possible for a single individual to amass more power than the government of Rome. After gaining control of the northern armies and conquering Western Europe, Julius Caesar marched into Italy. During his short time in power, he revolutionized Roman politics. After Julius Caesar, and after the success of his nephew Augustus, all of the power of Rome would now be concentrated in the hands of one man, the emperor.

Being the emperor of Rome was mostly a matter of keeping the army under control and protecting the borders. Many of the emperors gained power through military force, sometimes after long and bloody civil wars. They often resorted to bribery or murder to remove their opponents. Once in power, it was not long before they were assassinated by their palace guards, defeated in battle by their friends, or killed by their own soldiers to avoid further bloodshed.

Tradition dictated that when a leader died, his power would pass down to his son or to the next nearest family member. When Roman emperors passed their power down to family members, it did not take long before the empire passed into the hands of fools, madmen, or children. The most stable line of emperors were those who were chosen by the previous emperor, and adopted as their son and successor.

Marcus Aurelius Marcus Aurelius was born into an aristocratic family in Rome in the year 121. His father died when he was still very young, and he was cared for by his grandfather, who arranged for him to be educated in Stoic philosophy. As an adult, he became a trusted friend and advisor to the reigning emperor, who later adopted him as his son. In the year 161, Marcus Aurelius became the emperor of Rome.

Before his reign, the empire had enjoyed centuries of relative peace and prosperity. But in his first year, the Persians tried to regain control of the eastern provinces. The Persians were crushed, but the returning soldiers carried back a plague which was spreading from Asia. The disease devastated the population of the empire, seriously diminishing Rome's resources.

Barbarian tribes then crossed the northern frontier and drove deep into Roman territory. The emperor personally commanded the empire's defense, pushing the tribesmen back across the border into Germany. He then spent much of the remainder of his life battling to force the barbarians into submission, a task he almost completed before dying of plague in the year 180.

During his reign, Aurelius depended on Stoic philosophy for guidance through his years of hardship. He applied his philosophical ideals to provide a style of government that was honest and fair. He recorded his thoughts in a diary which later became one of the defining works of Stoic philosophy. Much of this was written while he was camped with his army at the front line between battles ...

In the life of a man, his time is but a moment, his situation uncertain, his senses a dim glow, his body in constant decay, his soul washed around by waves of emotion, his fortune hard to know, and his fame doubtful. All that is of the body is like a flowing stream, and all that is of the soul is like dreams and vapors. He is like a soldier on a tour of duty through a foreign land, and after glory comes oblivion.

Where then can a man find the instructions to guide his steps? There is only one kind of knowledge that can protect a man's spirit from harm so that it remains unaffected by either pleasure or pain, and this is the kind of knowledge comes from an understanding of philosophy.

Philosophy directs us to do nothing without good purpose or with dishonest intent. It frees us from having to depend on the thoughts or actions of others. And it helps us to accept everything, good and bad, as having come from the same ultimate source as ourselves.

Most importantly, only an understanding of philosophy can free us from the anxiety of death, as being nothing more than a simple dissolving of the elements from which every living thing is made. If these elements themselves take no harm from their ceaseless forming and reforming, then why should we fear the disintegration and release of the elements within ourselves? It is but nature's way, and in the ways of nature there is no evil to be found.

Think of how long you have been delaying your enlightenment, and how although the gods continue to grant you opportunities, you continue to take no advantage of them. It is time now to learn about the nature of the universe to which you belong, and about the higher nature which is responsible for your existence, and to understand that you are only in existence for a limited time. If you do not take advantage of this opportunity to learn, then the opportunity will be gone, and you will be gone, and you will never get this chance again.

Either the universe is just a chaotic mass of atoms, randomly forming intricate structures which dissolve over time and scatter away, or else it is an ordered system governed by a purposeful higher nature. If the world is purposeless and chaotic, then why should I continue to suffer through it? Or why should I care about anything other than how to keep my dust from returning to the earth? Why should I feel responsible for anything, when regardless of what I do, death will take me sooner or later? But if there is order and purpose, then I will show reverence, and I will remain steadfast in my duties, and I will put my trust in the purposeful governing force.

Keep yourself simple, good, sincere, serious, humble, kind, affectionate, and thoughtful. Stand up for truth and justice, remain resolute in your devotion to duty, and accept whatever your fate may be. Always strive your hardest to be the kind of man that philosophy would have you to be. Respect the gods and comfort your fellow mortals. Life is short and this earthly existence has only one reward, the opportunity to be of a pious disposition and to act in an unselfish way.

As long as you are carrying out your duties, do not be concerned about whether you are freezing cold or beside a good fire; exhausted from battle or fresh from sound sleep; hated or loved; in the act of dying, or going about some other piece of business. For even dying is part of the business of life, and there too, nothing more is required of us than to see the moment's work well done.

In everything you do, as a Roman and as a man, resolve yourself to do those things with dignity and humanity. Avoid being selfish, careless, or unreasonable. Do not try to impress others or think of yourself too highly. And do not let your thoughts turn to unhappiness. See how few things a man needs to master for his days to be peaceful and holy. He has but to follow this advice and the gods will ask for nothing more.

The happiness of your life depends on the quality of your thoughts. So guard your thoughts and take care not to entertain any notions that are unsuitable to virtue or reason.

Religious cults Julius and Augustus Caesar were both declared to be gods after their death. It then became tradition for the senate to declare dead emperors to be gods. This led one emperor to joke with his dying words, "Alas I think I am becoming a god". Some emperors even demanded that the senate declare them to be gods while they were still living. People were expected to participate in ceremonies to honor the emperors as gods, regardless of what they truly believed.

Temples throughout the empire contained statues of Jupiter, the king of the gods, who was the Roman equivalent of the Greek god Zeus. Other temples celebrated Isis, the Egyptian queen of heaven. Statues of Isis depicted her holding the baby god Horus, who had died and been reborn.

But as traditional religion declined, new religious cults competed to meet the spiritual needs of the masses. Since the invention of the alphabet, there had been one thousand years to think about, experiment with, and write down all of the essential ingredients of religion and philosophy. New cults now borrowed heavily from the lessons of the past.

One influential cult was based upon a mystical interpretation of Plato. Neo-Platonism was like a rational science that attempted to break down and describe every aspect of the divine essence and its relationship with the human soul.

An Alexandrian Jew named Philo tried using Greek philosophy to interpret the Jewish scriptures. He wanted to unite the two traditions by suggesting that the Greek philosophers had been inspired by the same God who had revealed himself to the Jews.

But only Christianity had the right combination of ingredients to appeal to both the masses and also eventually the ruling elite. Based on ancient scriptures, with a solid creation myth, its own collection of inspired writings, a convincing story about the appearance of God as a man, a morality based upon personal maturity rather than harsh punishment, role models for both men and women, and a good organizational structure. Christianity was destined to grow to become the dominant religion.

Greek philosophy was eventually extinguished by the hostility of Christianity towards other beliefs. Many of the followers of Greek philosophy were forced to move to Syria and other eastern countries to escape persecution by the Christian authorities. Many of the books they carried with them were translated into other languages. It would not be until the crusades, almost one thousand years later, that Greek philosophy would be rediscovered by the Greek and Roman worlds.

Shattering the Sacred Myths - Chapter 6

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A Rational History of Christianity

Christianity's rise to power followed by Europe's descent into a dark age.

The land of Israel was situated within easy reach of many of the ancient empires. Its location was strategically important as the doorway to Egypt. Israel was periodically invaded and occupied by the Egyptians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans. These diverse cultures helped to shape the development of the two major religions to come out of Israel - Judaism and Christianity.

Israel was captured by the Persians around 550 BC and remained under Persian control until the invasion of the Greeks around 330 BC. The land was then ruled by Greek kings for the next 150 years.

Greek culture was eagerly absorbed and had a lasting effect on the entire region. By the time the Greek Empire was taken over by the Romans, many Jews spoke Greek, and many educated Jews were familiar with Greek philosophy.

Augustus Caesar became the emperor of Rome in 27 BC, and he ruled the empire for over forty years. This period of history became known as the time of the 'Great Roman Peace'. Mediterranean trade flourished and regional economies experienced unprecedented prosperity. Diverse cultures intermingled and shared their ideas, inspiring a resurgence of art, architecture, and literature.

Among the Jews at the time, there were a number of different sects of Judaism. The largest sect was the Pharisees, who were influenced by the Persians and who believed in life after death. Then there were the Sadducees, who were influenced by the Greeks. The Sadducees held the high priesthood and other positions of power, and they did not believe in life after death.

Then there was a radical sect called the Essenes. This group was opposed to the priesthood in Jerusalem. They chose to live in separate communities, they were pacifists, they practiced ceremonial baptisms, and many of them were celibate. They had been developing their own scriptures and were anxiously awaiting the arrival of a messiah.

The last independent king of Israel was Herod the Great who ruled alongside Augustus Caesar until the final year BC. After Herod's death, the Romans divided Israel into a number of territories, each ruled by a king or governor appointed to serve Rome.

Many Jews struggled to maintain their political and religious independence. Radical political parties and religious sects appeared, but any group that was openly opposed to the Roman occupation was hunted down and its leaders were killed.

Jesus According to the legend, the man who became known as Jesus Christ grew up in Israel as the Romans were establishing their authority over the Jews.

Jesus seems to have become concerned about the level of violence and corruption in the world around him, and about the lack of moral responsibility and social cohesion. At around the age of thirty, he became a religious reformer on a mission to change the traditional Jewish beliefs and customs.

Jesus was written to have said that God intended for us all to be peaceful, loving, and forgiving to one another. He said that you must love others as much as you would love yourself, and not to do anything to anyone that you would not want done to you. He said that God forgives those who realize their wrongdoings and change their ways.

Jesus was said to have preached that there is a heavenly kingdom that exists in the midst of our earthly kingdoms. A person's life cannot be judged by the changing standards of this evil world. Our earthly standards will always be corrupted by greed, lust, and other selfish interests. A person's life can only truly be judged by the eternal standards of God's heavenly kingdom.

He was written to have said that no person can serve two masters. You cannot serve God while pursuing your own selfish desires. Only after abandoning your pursuit of pleasure and your ambition for wealth and power can you truly live to serve God.

In his sermon on the mount from the gospel of Matthew, Jesus was reported to have said ...

You have heard how men of ancient times were told, "Do not murder", and "Whoever is guilty of murder must be punished". But I tell you that anyone who is angry at his fellow man without reason is guilty, and whoever speaks abusively about his fellow man is guilty, and whoever condemns his fellow man to death shall himself be condemned to the fires of hell.

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth". But I say to you, do not seek revenge for any harm done to you. If someone slaps you in the face, turn your head and let him slap you again. If someone tries to take your robe, let him have your tunic as well. And if someone forces you to walk one mile, walk with them two miles instead. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the borrower.

You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy". But I say to you, love your enemy and help those who hate you, so that you may be servants of your heavenly father. For he makes the sun shine upon the good and the evil, and he pours the rain upon the just and the unjust. If you love only those who love you then how does your conduct excel? And if you welcome only your family and friends then how do you differ from non-believers who do the same? You then are to be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect.

Do not pass judgment on others, for the way you judge others you will be judged. Why notice the splinter in your brother's eye without taking notice of the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me extract that splinter from your eye", when there is a log in your own eye? Do not be a hypocrite. First get rid of the log in your own eye, then you will see clearly to extract the splinter from your brother's eye.

You have heard that it was said, "Be faithful to your wife". But I tell you that any man who looks with desire upon another woman has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to be unfaithful then pluck it out and throw it away from you. You would do better to lose one of your eyes than to live your life dishonestly.

Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the seeker finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. If your son was to ask you for a loaf of bread, would you give him a stone? Or if he asked for a fish, would you give him a snake? If you then, evil as you are, know enough to give your children what is good, then how much more surely will the goodness of God's heavenly kingdom provide for those who ask. Accordingly, whatever you would have other people do for you, do the same for them.

Everyone then, who listens to these sayings of mine and puts them into practice will be like a thoughtful man who built his house upon the rock. The rains came down, the floods rose, the wind blew and beat upon that house, but it never collapsed, for it was based on the rock. And everyone who hears these sayings of mine and fails to practice them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rains came down, the floods rose, the wind blew and beat upon that house and it collapsed and was completely wrecked.

According to the legend, Jesus traveled widely, attracted followers, and gained support for his message. But he increasingly provoked the anger of the Jewish priesthood. After traveling to Jerusalem to preach, he was arrested by the authorities and executed. He died around the year 30.

The legend of Jesus continued to grow after his death. His followers idolized him for having been the heroic spokesperson for a more enlightened form of Judaism. Stories about Jesus grew more mythical as new followers added their own expectations about who they wanted Jesus to be and what they wanted him to have said. The one thing that united them all was their desire that his life and death should be significant enough to bring lasting social change.

Collections of wise sayings and stories about admirable deeds were attributed to Jesus. As the years passed and his following grew more enthusiastic, Jesus the man was gradually transformed into Jesus Christ, the mythical savior of mankind, so perfect in every way that that he was believed to be the spirit of God embodied in the flesh of a man.

There were no significant writings about Jesus until decades after his death. He was not mentioned in any reliable Jewish or Roman histories. Few people had heard about him and his following remained a small and relatively unimportant sect of Judaism.

Paul Paul was a fanatical Jew who was initially hostile to those who believed in Jesus. He was authorized by the Jewish authorities to hunt down members of the sect, but after witnessing the strength of their faith, he realized that stories about the son of God might be persuasive enough to spread the Jewish faith in God to the Greeks and Romans.

After converting to Christianity, Paul traveled throughout the Roman Empire, preaching to anybody who would listen. He was regularly beaten, stoned, ridiculed, and arrested, but he did manage to attract new followers and establish growing congregations in many Greek and Roman cities. In his letters to the various congregations, he wrote ...

If someone among you seems wise in this age then let him admit his ignorance, so that he may become wiser, for the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's estimation. For as much as by God's design the world failed to know God by means of its wisdom, God was pleased to save those who believe in him through the foolishness of Holy Scripture.

Since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, such as his eternal power and infinite wisdom, have been clearly shown in all the things that he has created. So that men were without excuse, because although they had knowledge of God, they failed to respect him or give thanks to him. Instead they indulged in speculations and found reasons to glorify themselves, and so their thoughts became darkened. Thinking they were wise, they had become foolish. They even tried to bend the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made in the likeness of a corruptible man, and in the likeness of birds, four-footed beasts, and reptiles.

I say to you and testify in the Lord that you must no longer live like unenlightened people, with their vain and selfish thoughts. Their understanding is darkened because they are far removed from the guidance of God. Because of their ignorance and the hardness of their hearts, they have no true feelings. They have abandoned themselves to sensuality, and with greedy minds they pursue sinful activities.

But those who know Christ, who have heard about him and have been taught that Jesus gave us the truth, you are to rid yourself of your old primitive nature which was corrupted by its deceitful desire, and renew the spirit of your mind, and adopt a new nature that is created in God's likeness in genuine righteousness and holiness. Putting aside falsehood to speak the truth to each other, because we are all one another's brothers.

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with tenderness of heart, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patient endurance. Bear with one another and forgive each other in case one has a grievance against the other. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so should you forgive also. And above all give love, which is the perfect bond of union. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts.

Do you not know that you are committed as slaves to serve the one to whom you have offered yourselves? Thank God that although you were once slaves to sin, your hearts have become obedient to the standard of teaching to which you were introduced, so that having been set free from sin, you became slaves to righteousness. For when you were slaves to sin, without righteousness, what good did you derive from those things of which you are now ashamed?

I beg you, therefore, to offer yourselves to be slaves in the service of God. Do not conform to worldly ways, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so as to sense for yourselves what is good and acceptable, and what is the will of God.

Do not suppress the Holy Spirit. Do not despise the words of the prophets, but test them all and keep what is good. And keep away from evil in every form.

The Jews The Jews had been told that they were God's chosen people, but Paul preached that God's love was for everybody, not just the Jews. Christianity would be a religion for every believer, regardless of race, gender, or class.

Colonies of Jews had settled in cities throughout the Roman Empire. Many Greek speaking Jews were persuaded to convert to Christianity along with Greeks and Romans who were not satisfied with their traditional religions or philosophies. But soon after being established in the Greek and Roman worlds, Christianity's roots in the Jewish world were extinguished.

Furious at the corruption of their Roman governors and encouraged by their own vast resources of money and men, the people of Israel rose up against the Romans in the year 66. The Roman army marched into Judea to regain control. The war lasted several years and millions of Jews were killed. The city of Jerusalem was destroyed and its inhabitants were either slaughtered or sold into slavery.

The Gospel stories Many stories were written about the life of Jesus. Most of these stories portrayed wildly differing accounts of what Jesus said and did. But only the four books known as the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John gained widespread acceptance. After centuries of debate by the bishops, they were included in the final choice of scriptures.

Mark had grown up among the early Christians. He wrote the first gospel in Greek after the death of Paul, around 40 years after the death of Jesus, and after the destruction of Jerusalem. Drawing from the clutter of myths surrounding Jesus, Mark skillfully wove together a story which aroused admiration and satisfied the hopes and expectations of believers.

In Mark's story, Jesus was baptized by a desert preacher who declared him to be the chosen one. He then traveled around the countryside, healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, casting out demons, and raising the dead. Throughout the story he struggled to teach the ignorant Jews a higher form of wisdom, but he was misunderstood by his followers, persecuted by the priests, and betrayed by a friend. After being crucified by the Romans, he rose from the dead and ascended to heaven to sit beside God.

The Jewish tradition is full of myths about miracles and divine interventions, and so Jesus needed to be said to have performed miracles in order to prove that he possessed the power of God.

The sayings of Jesus had been recorded in Hebrew by his early followers. These sayings were translated into Greek and combined with Mark's story to produce the gospel of Matthew. Throughout the gospel stories, Jesus was said to have fulfilled many obscure Jewish prophecies about the coming of a messiah. Matthew added the story of the virgin birth to help fulfill these prophecies and make it easier for people to relate to Jesus as being the son of God.

The gospel stories say that Jesus expected to be tortured and killed in order for his life to be seen as a sacrifice and for his example and teachings to be immortalized. His suffering continues to inspire

those believers who have also suffered in their own personal struggle to maintain honest and loving principles in an often uncaring and hostile world.

In a world where few people can accept the concept of God without being able to envisage God in their mind's eye, the Christian mythmakers had constructed a human idol to be worshipped in the place of the incomprehensible God. To them it was more than just an acceptable compromise, they believed that it was part of God's plan that a myth about the son of God had been successfully conjured from raw enthusiasm at an opportune time.

The wisdom behind using Christ as an idol to represent God was expressed in the gospel of John, written around 70 years after the death of Jesus. Jesus was someone who could be loved by everyone, especially by children. He would give those who believed in him an awareness of God, and by aspiring to be like Jesus, they would gain an ideal guide for their own character and values.

Luke tried to enhance the teachings of Jesus and tie up the loose ends of the myth with his own gospel. He also wrote about the adventures of Paul. But adding extra detail to the story only increased the contradictions and absurdities of the myth.

In any case, it did not seem to matter that the pieces of the puzzle did not fit together, believers would be too blinded by the light to notice. And even if they did notice, they were usually so grateful for having been shown an alternative to the meaninglessness of an ordinary life that they did not seem to care.

Much of what Jesus was written to have said and done was metaphorical and symbolic. But the intended meanings of the gospels were misunderstood by most believers, especially the priests, who continued to preach that the events portrayed were literally true.

Other scriptures Many of the letters that were supposedly written by early Christians are known to be forgeries. Early Christian writers often signed their work using the name of an apostle in the hope of attracting a wider readership. Early church historians wrote that the epistles of Peter, John, Jude, and James were not written by those to whom they have been attributed. These writings were not universally accepted as scripture until after centuries of debate by the bishops. Church historians also doubt the authenticity of many of Paul's letters, especially his letter to the Hebrews.

Although the Book of Revelations was embraced by some early congregations, it was widely rejected by many others as a dangerous work of fantasy. Only because of its undying support over the centuries was it able to overcome fierce resistance to gain a permanent place among the scriptures.

The Jews had managed to keep the Persian myth about the Day of Judgment out of their scriptures, but it became firmly entrenched in the Christian religion. The scriptures say that the faithful will be rewarded with resurrection and eternal life, just like Jesus had been resurrected, while the sinners and non-believers will be punished with eternal damnation.

Although the fear of hell is often considered to be an effective way of encouraging people to restrain their behavior, it is also widely criticized for retarding the emotional growth of believers by having their moral choices depend only on reward and punishment.

The Trinity Trying to define the exact relationship between Jesus and God became the most serious problem facing the early church. The commandments of Judaism clearly state that there can only be one God, but the Son of God seemed to be a separate lesser God. Even the bishops were confused, and many of them were drawn into bitter and sometimes bloody disputes. Eventually the concept of the 'Trinity' was devised to cloud the issue behind a mysterious word.

There were many different sects among the early Christians, each sect having its own unique beliefs and preferring its own choice of scriptures. Some sects insisted that Jesus was just a man. Others encouraged freedom from sexual restraint. Eventually one sect gained political power and all other sects were persecuted out of existence. Any writings not favored by the prevailing sect were banned or destroyed. Few of these banned writings have survived.

Constantine The Romans usually showed tolerance towards popular religions as long as they did not challenge the authority of Rome. But many early Christians publicly denounced the gods of the empire and openly criticized the divinity of the emperor. Many refused to cooperate with Roman authorities or participate in state affairs.

As Christianity continued to grow in popularity, it became an effective opposition group, united and disciplined in its protest against many of the unnecessarily cruel and vulgar aspects of Roman tradition. This provoked a number of emperors to become openly hostile towards it. But executing Christians only seemed to strengthen this religion whose founder had also been executed by the Romans.

By the year 306, a significant percentage of the empire's population had become Christian. Around this time, a handful of military commanders were battling for control of the empire. One of them, Constantine, took advantage of the growing sympathy towards Christianity by making it known that he supported the Christian cause. In one decisive battle, despite being outnumbered, his troops won a comfortable victory. After becoming emperor, Constantine proclaimed tolerance for Christianity throughout the empire.

During his reign, he gradually transformed Christianity into a state religion. He began by exempting the church from taxation because of their service to the poor. Over the following years, he continued to show favor to Christian bishops until he eventually gave them power over state officials and courts of law.

Roman emperors had traditionally assumed the role of being the chief priest of whatever the popular religions were at the time. Religious cults either gained or lost popularity solely because of the emperor's interest in them. After Constantine converted to Christianity, many people followed his lead and Christianity soon became the most popular religion in the empire.

The Church The history of Christianity has been marked by frequent disputes between bishops over the interpretation of scripture. In early times, these disputes often led to power struggles within the church. Any bishop who held an opinion that was different from the majority of bishops was condemned as a heretic.

During the reign of Constantine, the bishops became bitterly divided over the relationship between Jesus and God. In the year 324, Constantine tried to resolve this dispute by sending letters to the leaders of each faction. Hosius, the bishop of Cordova, was sent to deliver these letters, and upon delivering them, he was written to have said ...

My brothers, Christianity has hardly begun to enjoy peace, and you are about to plunge it into eternal discord. The emperor is only too right to tell you that you are quarreling about a very trivial matter. If the object of the dispute were essential, then Jesus Christ, who we all recognize as our highest authority, would certainly have spoken of it.

God would not have sent his own son to earth in order not to teach us what is true. Anything that he did not expressly tell us is the work of men, and they are likely to be mistaken. Jesus has commanded you to love each other, and you begin by disobeying him and hating one another, and creating division throughout the empire.

Pride alone gives birth to these disputes, and Jesus, your master, has ordered you to be humble. None of you could know whether Jesus was made or begotten. And why should his nature concern you, so long as yours is to be honest and reasonable? What does a meaningless science of words have in common with the morality which should guide your actions?

You confound people's faith with mysteries when you should be strengthening religion through virtue. Do you want Christianity to splinter into mass of conflicting beliefs? Is that what Christ came for? Stop disputing; worship, build, humble yourselves, feed the poor, and calm family quarrels instead of scandalizing the entire empire with your discord.

Augustine In order to maintain unity and avoid conflict, the bishops needed to agree on one clear interpretation. The church slowly approached an official position as each dispute was resolved through heated debate. Influential bishops argued their viewpoints in letters and books. Innovative ideas were condemned as heresy. In the end, the least offensive interpretation was eventually agreed upon by the weary bishops.

The most influential writer to rise out of this period was the bishop who became known as Saint Augustine. In the absence of anything better, his writings on a wide range of subjects seemed to satisfy the need for a comprehensive explanation of the Bible. Augustine's writings became sacred in their own way. His books still form the backbone of Catholic philosophy today. He died during the barbarian invasions around the year 430. Augustine wrote ...

When the question is asked, what we are to believe in regard to religion, it is not necessary to probe into the nature of things, as was done by the Greek scientists. We need not be alarmed should the Christian not know the number of elements; the motion of the heavenly bodies; the shape of the cosmos; the species of animals and plants; the nature of stones, rivers, and mountains; about time and distance; the signs of coming storms; or about a thousand other things which these scientists have either found out, or think they have found out.

For even these men themselves, endowed as they are with so much genius, burning with zeal, abounding in leisure, tracking some things by the aid of human conjecture, searching into others with the aids of history and experience, have not found out all things; and even their boasted discoveries are more often mere guesses rather than certain knowledge.

It is enough for the Christian to believe that the only cause of all created things, whether heavenly or earthly, visible or invisible, is the goodness of the creator, the one true God; and that nothing exists but Himself that does not derive its existence from Him. And that he is the Trinity, meaning he is the Father, and the Son begotten of the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father, all being one and the same spirit.

Augustine knew that Christianity was not compatible with science. For Christians, there was no need for new discoveries. Everything that mankind would ever need to know about God, nature, or humanity was to be found in the Bible. The process of discovery that began in ancient Greece had come to an end. Books would be destroyed and knowledge would be lost, marking the beginning of a dark age that would last for the next thousand years.

Moral influence The Romans had long enjoyed coming to the Coliseum to see gladiators, criminals, and wild animals fight to the death. Their taste for violence reflected the savagery of a conquering nation. 5000 animals were slaughtered to celebrate the opening of the Coliseum in the year 80. Centuries later, crowds were entertained by the spectacle of Christians being eaten by lions.

Around the year 430, a Christian monk entered the arena and interrupted a fight between two gladiators. He was stoned to death by an outraged crowd, but his protest was successful. The Christian emperor at the time declared an end to all gladiatorial death matches.

Ancient Rome was powered by slavery. Nations that refused to submit to Rome were conquered and their people were enslaved. Fathers who were unable to pay their debts were often forced to sell their children into slavery. Girls were abducted from poor rural areas and sold to wealthy Roman households.

Continuing the work that had been begun by the earlier Stoic emperors, Christian emperors reformed the laws to offer better protection for women, children, and slaves. Conditions continued to improve for slaves until they became virtually indistinguishable from common peasants.

Barbarian invasions The western provinces of the empire like France and Spain spoke mostly Latin, while the eastern provinces like Greece and Turkey spoke mostly Greek. Constantine recognized the growing wealth and cultural strength of the Greek speaking provinces by establishing a new capital in the Greek city of Byzantine, which he renamed Constantinople. The western provinces would later be governed by a Latin emperor in Rome, and the eastern provinces by a Greek emperor in Constantinople.

During the 400s, invasions and migrations of Asian tribes into Europe placed an unbearable strain on the defenses of the empire. Roman institutions were still recovering from the cultural upheaval that had followed the rise of Christianity. The majority of troops guarding the northern border were now barbarian tribesmen. Rivalry between the two halves of the empire made the situation even more dangerous.

Rome's frontiers eventually crumbled as barbarian tribes from northern and eastern Europe flooded into the empire and soon conquered Italy, Spain, and North Africa. Rome was repeatedly sacked, its treasures stolen, its buildings burned, and its people massacred. Wherever the barbarians settled, Roman civilization was replaced by primitive tribal law and culture. The western half of the empire came to an end in the year 476 when a barbarian warlord declared himself to be the king of Italy.

Throughout Western Europe, there was a dramatic decline in trade. Law and order gave way to banditry. People moved out of the towns and cities, and within a few generations, reading and writing were largely forgotten. Roman buildings, bridges, and roads fell into disrepair and became overgrown with weeds. The knowledge needed to reconstruct them was gradually lost. Peasants in centuries to come would look at the ancient ruins and think that they were built by demons.

The eastern half of the empire survived the invasions and eventually recaptured Italy, North Africa, and the coastal regions of southern Spain. The church in Rome also survived, and the bishop of Rome, otherwise known as the pope, rose to become the spiritual leader of the western churches. The eastern churches took their directions from the eastern emperor in Constantinople. Christianity continued to spread throughout Europe as devoted missionaries worked to convert pagan kings.

By the late 500s, Christianity had reached the height of its intolerance. Followers of other religions were persecuted, denied property rights, and banished into exile. Anybody who questioned the opinions of the bishops was charged with heresy and often condemned to death.

Charlemagne By the mid 600s, Arab tribes had been united by Islam and were conquering many of the territories of the eastern half of the empire, gaining control of Palestine, Syria, and North Africa. They soon invaded Spain and then crossed the mountains into France. After losing a decisive battle to French forces, they retreated back to Spain.

Christians commonly prayed before pictures and statues of Jesus and Mary. Muslims claimed that this was idol worship. The eastern emperor agreed and ordered the destruction of all religious icons, but the western churches refused to obey. The eastern emperor threatened to invade Rome, but the pope countered this threat by forming an alliance with French kings. Division grew between the eastern and western churches.

The French king Charlemagne (Charles the Great) came to power in 768. His grandfather had repelled the Muslim invasion, and now he was determined to restore the western half of the empire and bring order to Europe. He began by conquering much of northern and eastern Europe and converting the barbarian tribes to Christianity.

Using an army of Christian priests who also acted as executioners, he threatened to kill any tribesman who refused to accept Christ as their savior. The older generations pretended to be Christian out of fear, but their children grew up knowing no other religion. Conversion to Christianity proved to be an effective way of taming the warrior habits of the northern tribes.

Charlemagne continued to expand his empire and strengthen the church in Rome. In the year 800, the pope crowned him emperor of the western half of the empire. Charlemagne wanted to form a permanent alliance between church and state, but over the following centuries, this degenerated into a power struggle between popes and emperors that continued to dominate European politics for nearly a thousand years.

The Middle Ages By the mid 800s, Muslim warships controlled most of the Mediterranean Sea. They captured Sicily and invaded parts of Italy, almost capturing Rome itself. If it had not been for the successful efforts of Italian, German, and Greek forces then the history of Europe would have been significantly different.

Vikings from the north and Huns from the east continued to raid the struggling Christian kingdoms, destroying villages, capturing women, and looting the golden ornaments and jeweled relics from churches and monasteries. The Vikings established themselves as lords over much of Europe, giving rise to a new aristocracy. After being converted to Christianity, they ceased their raids and greater stability descended upon Europe.

The book of revelations describes the end of the world. In the years leading up to the year 1000, there was a growing anxiety that the world was going to come to an end. Many believers packed their belongings onto wagons and began a hazardous journey towards the holy land. Villages throughout Europe were left abandoned. The church refused to deny that the end was near, as believers were donating their property to the church in a final effort to gain favor with God. The year 1000 came and went and nothing happened.

Kings and aristocrats owned the land and enslaved the peasants to work in the fields and fight in the wars. Popes often gained the affection of the oppressed masses by speaking out against injustices and by supporting popular resistance against tyranny. The church played a vital role in promoting community values and providing charity for the poor.

By the mid 1000s, married priests were passing their parishes down to their sons, kings were appointing their political allies as bishops, and Italian princes had taken control of Rome and were selling the papacy to the highest bidder. The church had descended into anarchy and corruption as aristocrats shamelessly exploited it to gain wealth and power. True believers struggled to reform the church. One new rule was to forbid priests from marrying and having children.

Disagreements continued to push the eastern and western churches further apart. One disagreement was about the nature of the Trinity. Did the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father alone, or from both the Father and the Son? These differences were exploited for political purposes, and the two sides eventually excommunicated each other. The western church became Catholic and the eastern church became Orthodox.

The Crusades Warrior tribes from central Asia converted to Islam in the 900s. Known as the Turks, they were employed as mercenary soldiers by the Arabs. Within a century they had gained control of the Muslim empire and were invading the area of land now known as Turkey. After the Greek armies were crushed by the Turks, the eastern emperor pleaded to the pope for assistance.

The pope responded by gathering forces from all over Europe to launch a religious crusade. But rather than recapturing Turkey, they invaded Syria and Israel and captured Jerusalem instead, whose entire population was slaughtered, many of whom were eastern Christians.

The crusades greatly strengthened the pope's power by uniting all of Europe under his command. The crusaders held on to Jerusalem for almost a century. Several other crusades were launched during this time, each one facing increased resistance from Muslim armies.

Rather than attacking the Muslims, the armies of the last crusade decided to attack Constantinople instead and loot its treasures. Unconquered since the days of the old Roman Empire, Constantinople had been one of the wealthiest cities in the world. Centuries later, the Turks used cannons to blast their way through its defensive walls, finally bringing an end to the eastern half of the Roman Empire. Constantinople is now known as Istanbul.

Universities Science, mathematics, and philosophy had been abandoned throughout Europe after the rise of Christianity and the fall of Rome. Many of the books written by ancient Greeks and Romans had been lost and forgotten. Some of these works were preserved by Greek book collectors and Irish monks. Others were translated into Arabic and for hundreds of years were only available to Muslim and Jewish scholars.

During the reign of Charlemagne, church schools had been established across Europe to teach new generations of priests how to read and write. The importance of these schools grew over the centuries as they began teaching administration and commerce to aristocrats and wealthy merchants. Universities were established in the 1100s to teach theology, law, and medicine.

The Muslims were forced out of Spain in the 1200s, and their schools and libraries fell into the hands of the Europeans. European scholars eagerly absorbed the knowledge of their Muslim and Jewish counterparts and began translating their collections of ancient literature into Latin. European universities soon added science, mathematics, and philosophy to their range of subjects.

Thomas Aquinas The rediscovery of Aristotle and other ancient philosophers had a profound effect on European thought. This caused the Catholic Church to become deeply concerned. Those whose ideas strayed too far from Christianity were accused of heresy. Scholars tried to defend themselves by arguing that there was no contradiction between philosophical reasoning and religious faith.

The most influential scholar of the time was an Italian monk who became known as Saint Thomas Aquinas. His writings helped to ease the growing conflict between faith and reason. Aquinas believed that although observation and rational thinking can take us a long way towards understanding the design of nature, our purpose in nature can only be revealed through religious scripture.

Aquinas did not believe that anything could be discovered about nature that would ever cast serious doubt on the existence of God. He wrote ...

Although the truth about God might be discovered through human reasoning alone, it is advantageous that this truth has been revealed to men by way of religious faith, because if the search for this kind of truth were left entirely to reason, three disadvantages would follow.

One disadvantage is that very few people would have an informed understanding of God. A considerable amount of study is required to discover the truth, and most people are hindered from carrying out such study. Some are hindered by their limited ability to understand things, and it may not be in their nature to learn such knowledge. No amount of study could ever teach them of the highest form of human knowledge, which is the knowledge of God.

Other people are hindered by the needs of business and the concerns of property management. Our human society requires that most men be devoted to the pursuit of such worldly affairs. And these men could not possibly spend enough time learning the lessons of speculative enquiry required to arrive at the highest point of human enquiry, which is an understanding of God.

And few people are interested in carrying out such a study. The knowledge required to contemplate God requires so much other knowledge. Most of the sciences contribute something to the understanding of God. And so only after much study in many other subjects will a person be ready to learn about metaphysics and begin their search for the divine truth, and this is a labor that few are willing to undergo for sheer love of knowledge.

Another disadvantage is that those who reach an understanding about the nature of God and the truth behind the existence of all things take such a long time to learn these things because of the profound depth of such truth and the great amount of study required, and also because in youth and early manhood, the soul is tossed around in the waves of passion and is not fit for the study of such high truth. Only in settled age does the soul become prudent and scientific.

Thus, if the only way to discover the knowledge of God was by way of reason, then the human race would dwell for a long time in the thick darkness of ignorance, as the knowledge of God, the best instrument for making men good and wise, would come to only a few, and only to those few after much of their lives had already passed.

A third disadvantage is that, because of our limited ability to think, and our wild imaginations, there will always be a degree of error in the conclusions that we reach using human reason. And this is why many men continue to doubt even the most accurate conclusions, unable to see the strength of these conclusions, and seeing the great diversity of opinions held by other men who have a reputation for being wise.

So therefore it was necessary for the truth concerning divine things to be presented to men with the fixed certainty that comes from faith. It is wholesome, and it is a divine mercy that those things that test the limits of human reason have been given to us as articles of faith, so that all men might easily partake in the knowledge of God without any doubt or error. And so the scriptures say, "Now you walk not as the non-believers walk in the vanity of their own notions and with their darkened understandings", and, "I will make all my sons educated in the ways of the Lord."

The Great Schism Before the invention of the printing press, the Bible had been painstakingly hand copied by monks, and copies were carefully protected by the church. The common person was not allowed to read the Bible. The church was afraid that without the proper training, readers might not adhere to the official interpretation. The penalty for being found in possession of a Bible was to be burned at the stake.

During the 1200s and 1300s, there was a growing movement in the more liberal areas of Italy and France to reject the Catholic monopoly on religion. Alternative beliefs began to attract followers. The pope reacted by organizing a series of massacres. He then introduced the Inquisition, with its torture chambers and public executions, intended to silence dissent and terrify the population into loyalty.

In the year 1378, French cardinals rejected the election of an Italian pope and elected their own pope instead. An intense political struggle followed, with the two rival popes excommunicating each other and calling each other the 'antipope'. The dispute continued for decades. This period of weakness was seized upon by rebel priests in England and Germany. One rebel priest went so far as to declare all popes to be antichrists.

With the position of the pope having been disgraced, the rebel priests proclaimed that the Bible was a higher authority than any pope, and so true believers should be able to read it and interpret it for themselves. They began translating the Bible into English and German. A new pope was eventually chosen and the dispute was settled. The rebel priests were condemned and some were put to death, but it was too late, their ideas had already begun to spread throughout Europe.

The printing press Since long before the crusades, the Catholic Church had been raising funds through the sale of indulgences. An indulgence was a voucher that you could buy from the church which guaranteed you divine forgiveness for your sins. There were different prices for different sins, and you could even buy indulgences for the dead. The crusades were partly funded by the sale of indulgences, and by the time the crusades were over, they had become a major source of revenue for the church.

Johannes Gutenberg was a German metalworker who saw that there was a profit to be made by selling church related products to faithful Christians. He started by making religious trinkets, and then later realized that he could make a fortune by finding a faster and easier way to print indulgences rather than copying them by hand.

He created separate stamps for each letter, which were arranged on a frame to create a printing plate. The plate was then covered with ink and pressed against paper. The plate could be used again and again to print thousands of perfect copies. The success of Gutenberg's technique made him ambitious enough to attempt printing the Bible.

After years of work refining the process and designing the plates, he successfully printed hundreds of copies of the Bible and began selling them in 1455, each one costing an amount equal to several years pay for the average worker. But Gutenberg failed to make enough money to recover his development costs and his new invention was taken away from him by his financier.

Printing presses soon began appearing throughout Europe. For the first time in history, the general public had cheap access to growing amounts of information. European culture began to blossom as it embraced this new form of communication.

By the year 1500, thousands of different books had been published, covering a wide range of subjects, and millions of copies of these books had been sold. Also by this time, the Catholic Church had begun banning and burning books that it found offensive. But this had little effect, as heretics could now distribute printed books faster than priests could burn them.

The Protestant Reformation In 1517, a German university professor named Martin Luther published a paper objecting to the corrupt practices of the church. He argued that indulgences were a fraud. They promoted deceit and immorality, and they led people to become skeptical about religion. If the pope really cared for people, then he would empty purgatory out of love and not for money.

Luther was ordered to be silent, but instead he became even more outspoken. He was eventually condemned by the pope, but by now he had gained an immensely popular following. Princes throughout northern Europe saw this as an opportunity to gain political and financial independence from Rome. They began confiscating church property and formed their own national churches. This outraged the wealthy ruling class families in Italy.

The pope and the emperor sent armed forces into northern Europe to exterminate all opposition and regain control. European civilization fell into a series of long and bloody religious wars. Villages and towns were burned to the ground and populations were massacred. Millions of people were killed and millions more were forced to flee. Over one hundred years later, nobody was winning and everybody was exhausted by war. A peace treaty was signed in 1648 and Europe was divided into Catholic and Protestant countries.

Shattering the Sacred Myths - Chapter 7

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The Rise of Modern Science

The problems faced by scientifically-minded people as the western world struggled to emerge from the Christian dark ages.

Thousands of years ago, most people believed that the earth was flat, and that the gods were responsible for the motion of the sun, the moon, and the stars. The ancient Babylonians described the universe as a closed chamber with the earth as its floor. Around the earth lay a moat of water, beyond which stood high mountains supporting the dome of the heavens.

Early travelers used the stars in the night sky to help them navigate. They looked for recognizable patterns in the distribution of the stars. Throughout the ages, the shapes of some of these star patterns (or constellations) came to represent the mythical characters of campfire stories.

Years were measured by the passing of the seasons. Months were measured by the phases of the moon. The seven days of the week were dedicated to the seven gods who were thought to control the sun, the moon, and the five visible planets. These bodies appeared to move across the sky along a narrow band known as the zodiac. As they passed through the constellations, they were believed to have a mysterious influence on people's lives.

Attempts were made by some ancient civilizations to keep records about the motion of the sun, the moon, and the stars. As early as 4000 BC, the Egyptians had begun to count the passing of the years using 365 days in a year. But over the centuries, their years fell out of step with the seasons, because the actual number of days is 365.242.

The ancient Babylonians devised a calendar with 12 months in a year. Each month had 29 or 30 days in accordance with the lunar cycle. Every few years, a 13th month was added to keep the years in step with the seasons. Variations of the Babylonian calendar continued to be used across much of the

ancient world until the year 46 BC, when Julius Caesar introduced a new calendar throughout the Roman Empire.

Recognizing the need for a stable and predictable calendar, Caesar invited the help of astronomers from the city of Alexandria who recommended disregarding the lunar cycle and fixing the average length of a year to 365¼ days. The new calendar was proclaimed to have 12 months and 365 days in a year with one extra day every 4 years. The Julian calendar was so successful that it continued to be used throughout Europe for the next 1600 years.

The city of Alexandria The city of Alexandria in Egypt was named after the Greek conqueror, Alexander the Great, who established the city as a port on the mouth of the Nile River around 330 BC. Because of its convenient location on the major trading routes, it quickly grew to become one of the wealthiest cities in the Mediterranean, and one of the largest trading centers in the ancient world.

The Great Library of Alexandria was built by the Greek kings of Egypt who had inherited this part of Alexander's empire. Over the centuries, they devoted much of their wealth to collecting and copying books to add to their library. They collected books on every subject from all over the known world. Their library soon grew to become the largest collection of literature in the ancient world, possibly containing as many as half a million hand written papyrus scrolls.

The library also had research halls, laboratories, observatories, a dissecting room, a museum, a botanical garden, and a zoo. People traveled from all over the ancient world to study its collection of books on architecture, astronomy, geography, history, mathematics, medicine, philosophy, and physics.

Many famous discoveries were made at the library. Euclid wrote a book about geometry which has remained the standard for the last 2200 years. Archimedes invented the water screw, Galen laid down the foundations of medicine, and Heron invented the gear train and wrote books about steam engines and robots.

Alexandrian astronomers studied the stars, and by performing clever experiments and making careful measurements, they were able to calculate the size of the earth, the moon, and the sun, as well as the distances between them.

One astronomer, Aristarchus, wrote a book suggesting that the earth was just another planet. He said that the earth was spinning, the planets revolved around the sun, and the stars were a great distance away from the sun. But his ideas were rejected at the time because most people believed the earth was the center of the universe. They thought that if the earth was moving then it would leave the moon behind. And it did not make sense that the earth moved because nobody could feel the movement beneath their feet.

Around the year 150, a researcher named Ptolemy wrote an encyclopedia in which he summarized the work of the Alexandrian astronomers. Although Ptolemy considered the earth to be the center of the universe, he was able to accurately describe the relative motion of the sun and the planets by using circles within circles. Ptolemy's work remained the ultimate astronomical reference the next 1400 years.

Alexandria's destruction When Julius Caesar arrived in Alexandria in 48 BC, he became involved in a civil war between Queen Cleopatra VII and her brother King Ptolemy XIII. Caesar's forces came under attack from both land and sea. He gained the upper hand in the battle by setting fire to the docks to block the enemy fleet. Unfortunately, the fire spread from the dockyards to the library and destroyed many of the books.

The library continued to operate under the Roman Empire until the rise of Christianity. Under the command of a bishop named Cyril, the Jews were expelled from the city, followers of Greek philosophy were brutally murdered, and anything seen as a pagan influence was destroyed by rampaging mobs of fanatical Christians. Cyril was later honored with a sainthood. Whatever remained of the library was stolen or burned when the Muslims invaded Egypt in the year 640.

Only a small number of the books that were kept in the library have survived. All that remains of some of them are scattered fragments. Among the losses that we know about were several hundred

pieces of classical Greek literature, as well as books about science, mathematics, and the history of the ancient world.

Copernicus The calendar introduced by Julius Caesar was only accurate to 1 day in every 134 years, and over the centuries, there was a growing concern about the slipping of time. After the decline of the Roman Empire, the Catholic Church grew to become the only institution in Europe with enough authority to change the calendar. In 1514, the church asked for the opinion of a highly respected Polish scholar named Nicolas Copernicus.

Copernicus said that the motions of the sun and the moon were not yet sufficiently understood to attempt changing the calendar. He then continued for more than ten years to make careful observations of the night sky before finally writing a book in which he clearly demonstrated that the earth revolved around the sun.

Copernicus was reluctant to release his book out of fear of the criticism he would receive. His friends eventually convinced him to publish it shortly before his death. Although his ideas were not popular, they did become the basis for calendar reform. In 1582, Pope Gregory XIII decreed a new calendar in which three out of every four centuries lost one of its extra days. The new Gregorian calendar was accurate to 1 day in every 3000 years.

Catholic countries adopted the new calendar immediately. Protestant countries like England and Germany took until the 1700s and 1800s to change their calendars. Eastern European countries under the Greek Orthodox Church refused to change their calendars until the 1900s. The new calendar was eventually accepted across Europe and America and is still being used today.

Galileo As people get older, they often lose the ability to focus their sight on nearby or distant objects. The ancient Greeks knew that curved glass could bend light and make images appear larger or smaller, but it was not until the 1300s that the quality of glass and the techniques for working with glass had improved enough to allow craftsmen to begin making lenses for eyeglasses. By 1600, the techniques for grinding and polishing lenses and mirrors had improved enough to allow the invention of the telescope.

Galileo Galilei was an Italian mathematics professor who designed and built many of the world's first high powered telescopes. When he studied the night sky with his telescopes, he saw mountains and craters on the moon, he saw moons orbiting Jupiter, and he saw spots on the sun. In 1610, he published a book about his observations and his name soon became famous throughout Europe. He had demonstrated that the universe did not revolve around the earth, and his discoveries suggested that the earth was just another planet.

His discoveries upset a lot of people. University professors accused him of challenging the teachings of Aristotle, whose ideas about the universe had been considered to be the ultimate truth for centuries. Aristotle had written that it was common sense that the sun revolved around the earth. He had also written that different weights fall to earth at different speeds. Galileo proved this to be wrong by dropping two different sized stones from the leaning tower of Pisa. They both hit the ground at the same time.

Galileo was constantly forced to defend himself against accusations of heresy by the church. After appearing before a Vatican council in 1616, his books were banned and he was ordered not to hold or defend the belief that the earth revolves around the sun. While trying to defend himself, in a letter to the Grand Duchess of Tuscany, he wrote ...

Some years ago, as Your Serene Highness knows, I discovered many things in the heavens that had not been seen before our own age. The novelty of these things, as well as some consequences which followed from them, contradicted the commonly held notions of the academic professors, and stirred many of them up against me - as if I had placed these things in the sky with my own hands in order to upset nature and overturn the sciences. They seemed to forget that discovering new truths stimulates the investigation, establishment, and growth of the arts - and does not diminish or destroy them.

Showing a greater fondness for their own opinions than for the truth, they sought to deny and disprove these new things, which if they had cared to look for themselves, their own senses would

have demonstrated to them. To this end they hurled various charges and published numerous writings filled with vain arguments, and they made the grave mistake of sprinkling these with passages taken from places in the Bible, which they had failed to understand properly, and which were poorly suited to their purposes.

Men with a strong understanding of astronomical and physical science were immediately persuaded by my discoveries. There were others who denied them or remained in doubt only because they were strange and unexpected discoveries, and because they had not yet had the opportunity to see for themselves. These men are gradually becoming satisfied. But there are some who stubbornly cling to their original ideas, and for some unknown reason, they remain hostile not only towards my discoveries, but also towards me.

These men persist in their resolve to destroy me by any means they can think of. They are aware of my views in astronomy and philosophy. They know that I believe the sun to be situated in the center of the celestial bodies while the earth revolves around the sun. And they have endeavored to spread the opinion that such propositions are contrary to the Bible and as such are damnable and heretical.

Their reason for condemning the opinion that the earth moves and the sun stands still is that in many places in the Bible one may read that the sun moves and the earth stands still. Since the Bible cannot be wrong, it follows as a necessary consequence that anyone is mistaken and heretical who maintains that the sun is motionless and that the earth moves.

These men go about using the Bible for their own deceitful purposes. Contrary to the intention of the holy fathers, they would have us altogether abandon reason and the evidence of our senses in favor of some biblical passage, although under its surface the passage may contain a different meaning.

Nobody can deny that the Bible is often ambiguous, and may say things that are quite different from what its bare words suggest. If one were to always read the Bible literally, then one might fall into error. Not only contradictions and falsehoods might appear, but even grave heresies and follies. One might believe that God has hands and feet, as well as human emotions such as anger and hatred, and sometimes even forgetting the past or not knowing the future.

These propositions, inspired by the Holy Spirit, were written by the sacred scribes to accommodate the capacities of the common people, who are simple and uneducated. For the sake of those who deserve to be separated from the herd, it is necessary to express the true meaning of such passages, together with the special reasons for why they were set down in these words.

It is reasonable to say that whenever the Bible speaks about physical matters (especially those which may be complicated and hard to understand), it has been written in such a way as to avoid confusing the minds of the common people and causing them to reject the higher mysteries. In order to appeal to common thinking, the Bible has not hesitated to obscure some very important concepts, attributing some qualities to God that are extremely remote from (and even contrary to) his essence.

Who can rightly say that the Bible should be taken literally when it is speaking casually about the earth, the sun, or any other created thing? Especially when these things do not concern the primary purpose of the sacred writings, which is the service of God and the salvation of souls - matters that are beyond the comprehension of the common people.

The Holy Bible and the phenomena of nature both proceed from the designs of God. But in order to accommodate the understanding of every man, it was necessary for the Bible to say many things that may appear to be different from the absolute truth. But Nature, on the other hand, is exact and unchangeable. She never transgresses the laws imposed upon her, or cares about whether her methods of operation are understandable to men.

For that reason it appears that nothing which we can experience with our senses, or which can be proven by demonstration ought to be called into question (or much less condemned) upon the testimony of biblical passages that may have some different meaning beneath their words. God is no less excellently revealed in the laws of Nature than in the sacred statements of the Bible.

I am not suggesting that we should not have the greatest respect for the passages of Holy Scripture. I should judge that the authority of the Bible was designed to persuade men of those articles of faith, which surpassing all human reasoning could not be proven by science, or by any other means other than through the very mouth of the Holy Spirit.

Hence I should think it would be sensible not to permit anyone to use scripture to argue some physical conclusion to be true, when at some future time, a reasonable demonstration might show the contrary. Who indeed will set bounds to human ingenuity? Who will assert that everything in the universe capable of being known has already been discovered? Let us rather be honest and say, "The truths that we know are very few in comparison with those which we do not know."

In 1634, at the age of 70, Galileo was brought before the Vatican inquisition and threatened with torture if he did not publicly retract his views. He was sentenced to imprisonment and spent the rest of his life under house arrest. The persecution of Galileo remained an embarrassment for the Catholic Church for the next three centuries. The Vatican finally forgave him in 1992.

Descartes Although mainstream European society in the 1600s appeared to be faithfully Christian, the religious authorities were losing their power to silence criticism. After the religious wars between the Catholics and Protestants, and with the growing availability of books containing skeptical ideas, many educated people were beginning to doubt that there was anything worth believing in, least of all religion.

In the 1640s, the French philosopher Rene Descartes noticed that ...

Almost everyone who regards themselves as more intelligent than others takes refuge in skepticism, when they find nothing in the currently accepted philosophy to satisfy them, and they cannot see any alternative which is more true.

Descartes wanted to restore people's faith in the cosmic plan. He wrote books explaining how we lived in an orderly universe governed by laws of nature that could be discovered using science and mathematics. As well as being one of the pioneers of modern science and philosophy, Descartes tried using logic and reason to convince people to believe in the existence of God.

Early science The church and the universities at the time were too blinded by superstition and prejudice to be interested in supporting scientific discovery, but throughout the major European cities, there were wealthy men with lots of free time on their hands who enjoyed dabbling in science.

One such group of men joined forces in 1660 to form the Royal Society of London, whose purpose was to organize funding for scientific research and to publish new findings. In 1666, the government of France established the Paris Academy of Sciences, and by 1700, similar organizations were operating in Italy and Germany.

Early progress was slow, as there are limits to what can be observed with the naked eye. They lacked instruments to make precise measurements, but occasionally, some creative thinker would devise a clever experiment, carefully measure the results, and a profound discovery would be made.

It was found that every time an experiment was performed correctly, it would always produce the same result. This proved that some things always behave in predictable ways, and gave people a reason to believe that maybe everything in the universe behaved in a predictable way.

Newton In 1687, an English scholar named Isaac Newton modernized our understanding of the universe by publishing a book in which he explained the laws of gravity and motion. He declared that all objects were attracted to each other by a force called gravity, and this force was the reason why objects fell to earth. He used mathematics to show how the force of gravity was responsible for the motion of the planets around the sun.

Newton's theories indicated that we live in a 'mechanical universe', where everything works like the moving parts of a machine. The machine is always moving and it is the work of science to find out how. Like many other scientific thinkers at the time, Newton believed that God created the universe but then left it alone to operate, governed only by the laws of nature.

Scientists continued to write books and share their observations. These writings formed a growing collection of real knowledge about the workings of nature. Others were able to learn from and build upon previous discoveries. As one discovery led to another, a growing number of people became convinced that all of the secrets of the universe might eventually be discovered through the methods of science.

The Enlightenment European thinkers in the 1700s began to openly criticize Christianity. Although they were divided in their opinions, they valued the freedom to have an opinion, and they dared to express their views on religion without any fear. The public was exposed to an avalanche of new ideas.

This period of history became known as 'the Enlightenment', because it marked the beginning of a long struggle to free people's minds from more than a thousand years of domination by the teachings of the church. The thinkers of the enlightenment wanted to replace revelation and faith with knowledge and reason.

Some favored a more enlightened form of Christianity. They embraced the teachings of Jesus as a moral guide and a foundation for social justice, but they attacked the miraculous and supernatural aspects of the religion. They wanted Christianity to change and become more compatible with a scientific understanding of the world.

Others openly condemned Christianity, believing that it had long lost any intellectual credibility. The church had become authoritarian, superstitious, and fearful of science and philosophy. It had departed from reality and become lost in the dark delusions of sin, redemption, and hell.

Some philosophers wrote books trying to persuade people to believe in a more natural form of religion, one that rejected the need for churches or religious scripture. It was said that God shows himself in nature, and that we worship him best by living constructive moral lives.

Voltaire Voltaire was a French philosopher in the 1700s who was not afraid to criticize the church or the aristocracy. He was thrown into prison a number of times for his outspoken views and he spent much of his life in exile.

Voltaire wanted to replace Christianity with 'natural religion'. He wrote that although our observations of design and intelligence in nature make the existence of God obvious, organized religion can cause us to associate God with superstition and fanaticism. He said that believing in God makes us aspire to be good. If God did not exist then we would need to invent him.

In 1764, he released a book called 'Philosophical Dictionary' in which he exposed the myths of Christianity and highlighted the corruptions of the church. Addressing those who would defend the church and its mythology for the sake of trying to uphold public morality, he wrote ...

Don't you see that you pervert these poor people? Among them are many more rational thinkers than you realize. They laugh at your miracles and superstitions. They have enough good sense to see that you are preaching to them a discreditable religion, but they do not have enough sense to raise themselves to a pure religion free from superstition. Their passions make them believe that there is no religion at all because the only one they are taught is ridiculous. And so you become guilty of all the vices into which they plunge.

You would be stoned to death by the people if you taught them impure morals. Men have been made in such a way that they are quite willing to do evil, but they do not want it preached to them. Nothing can be gained from preaching wise morals that will be rejected because they are mixed with absurd fables. Because of your deceptions, which you could easily do without, you weaken the morality which you are obliged to teach.

It is necessary for every man to be honest, and the surest way to instill justice in all men is to teach them religion without superstition.

Attempts were made to define natural religion in a way that would inspire new generations to believe, but because it was seen as little more than a skeptical reaction against traditional religion, and because it rejected the idea of being defined by any kind of scripture, it was never really able to establish itself as an independent philosophy.

Natural religion continued to attract a small following of free thinkers, many of whom became members of the Unitarian Church. Although the Unitarians were often persecuted by conservatives, their church provided a meeting place where free thinking people could share their enlightened views without being accused of atheism. Isaac Newton, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Charles Dickens, and Charles Darwin were just a few of the many well known Unitarians.

Hume David Hume was a Scottish philosopher in the late 1700s who developed powerful arguments against religion. He said that religion was nothing more than a human invention. It was simply the projection of human hopes and fears onto external invisible objects. Religion began as an instinctual belief in spirits controlling the forces of nature, and this evolved into a cultural obligation to worship a single God of creation.

Hume did not deny the existence of God, but he rejected using myths about miracles to prove God's existence. He believed that miracles were violations of the laws of nature, and that our faith in the laws of nature should be as firm as any faith could ever be, because the entire world sees these laws working in a reliable way every day. And so regardless of how strong the argument is for a miracle, the evidence against it is stronger.

He said that human trickery and stupidity were so common that he would think that any reports of miracles were due to these reasons rather than admit that there had ever been any violation of the laws of nature. Only those claims that can be demonstrated by experimental science should be considered to be true. Any other claim should be "thrown into the fire".

Hume concluded that no reasonable argument could ever provide an adequate justification for religious morality. Our feelings about each issue have more authority than the application of any arbitrary system of moral values. Ideas about right and wrong are really whatever is in the best interests of the community at the time.

He also concluded that no reasonable argument could ever explain the existence of God or any of his attributes. He did concede that there may be grounds for a rational belief in a supreme creator and a world ordered and governed by divine providence, but this would be a leap of faith until science was able to provide deeper explanations for the mysteries of nature.

He said that although some rational minds were moved to believe in God through admiration for the natural order of the universe, the vast majority of ordinary men and women were moved by emotional responses to the uncertainties of life. They lived in fear and hope of secret and unknown causes, and so they were easily led to believe in superstition. Organized religion thrived by helping to relieve feelings of insecurity and vulnerability in a confusing and often hostile world.

Atheism Atheism grew more as a reaction against the absurdities of traditional religion than an exact belief. The writings of Hume and other atheists helped to calm the religious tensions that were still simmering throughout Europe after the religious wars. By raising the level of skepticism against Christianity, many people became less passionate about their own religious beliefs and more tolerant of others.

Atheists believed that good and evil were merely human inventions rather than universal absolutes. But then this led to the question of how anyone can justifiably argue against selfish greed or callous disregard. Unrestrained selfishness can end up harming everyone, including ourselves, and so we need to accept some practical restraints. Although atheist philosophers could see the need for upholding acceptable standards of behavior, they could not agree on what they were or how to promote them.

Since the time of Aristotle, philosophers had realized the need to find a non-religious groundwork for ethical values, but by the end of the 1700s, the enlightenment's inability to establish any clear alternative moral system had become a serious problem.

The abandonment of faith in any universal goodness was explored in the writings of the Marquis de Sade, who also abandoned any faith in the value of human life. De Sade declared that we are free from all moral values. Nature, far from having any purpose or any inherent goodness, is absolutely indifferent to the struggles of humanity.

The world according to de Sade was the opposite of what the religious prophets and moral philosophers had been preaching. De Sade wrote that generosity is often abused by those who see it as weakness, those who give more than they take just end up with less, and the selfish get what they want much more than the good.

In a world without any true values, the only thing to do is to pursue one's own pleasures. The greater the pleasure, the greater the value of the act. Since sexual pleasures are usually the most intense, these can be pursued without restraint. Crime is even better than sex under some circumstances, because it can be more exciting, and a sex crime is the best of all.

Most atheists viewed de Sade with horror because they saw in him the logical conclusion of their own beliefs. If there is no God, no purpose, no plan, no design, then there is no underlying foundation for morality, and no fundamental reason for the preservation of life in this world or in this universe. Nobody can be truly justified in imposing their own ideas about right and wrong upon anyone else.

Christianity The political revolutions that spread throughout Europe in the 1800s came as a shock to Christianity, which had long depended on a close association between church and state. Aristocrats began to lose their position as political and cultural leaders and were gradually replaced by the industrial elite. The new capitalist values, with their emphasis on competition and profit, had little in common with Christianity.

By the mid 1800s, the Catholic Church had grown openly hostile towards the modern world. One pope even declared steam trains to be evil. The church publicly condemned democracy, freedom of speech, and freedom of thought. When one pope demanded more influence over the governments of the world, many countries responded by passing laws restricting Catholicism. The population of Italy soon rose up in rebellion against papal control.

Other European churches withdrew from political power and instead concentrated on their monopoly as religious institutions. While most Europeans remained members of their traditional state churches, in the United States there were no state churches. This led to an intense competition between the different denominations for religious market share. Driven by market forces, Christianity in America rapidly descended to the lowest common denominator. Without the deeper explorations that European theology once provided, it grew increasingly shallow, evangelical, and fundamentalistic.

While conservative churches tried desperately to cling to the old ways, progressive churches compromised with scientific ideas and modern values, quietly admitting that the Bible was full of myths intended to support moral values that were open to interpretation. The focus of these churches shifted more towards providing social networks, promoting community values, doing charity work, and performing weddings and funerals.

Kant The enlightenment philosophers had tentatively ventured beyond traditional Christian ideas, and then when it seemed safe to speak freely, they turned against Christianity with a vengeance, punishing it for having held back the progress of philosophical questioning for so long. But then once they were free to ask themselves what the real truth was, they found that they could be certain of nothing.

Immanuel Kant was a German philosopher in the late 1700s who tried to overcome the growing tide of skepticism. He developed a comprehensive theory about how we think, how we experience things, and how we can be certain of what we know. He wanted to build a philosophical foundation for knowledge that would restore human confidence in absolute truths and values.

Kant's theories soon gained widespread acceptance as the best possible justification for knowledge and morality on the basis of human reason alone. His work inspired many others to build upon his foundations. But at the end of the day, his philosophy was too difficult to read, many of his ideas were flawed, and he only really confirmed what the skeptics were already saying.

By the mid 1800s, German philosophers were beginning to reject any faith in reason or progress. Every attempt to explain knowledge and experience in an understandable way had failed. The search for meaning had revealed no great answers. A radical new form of skepticism began to descend upon the world of philosophy with disastrous consequences. It was the end of the innocence of philosophy.

Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche was a German philosopher in the late 1800s. His father and grandfather were Lutheran church ministers. After spending his childhood studying Christianity, it was assumed that he would follow in their footsteps. He studied classical literature and philosophy as the world was becoming aware of the theory of evolution. Nietzsche lost his faith in Christianity and his thoughts turned instead to the rejection of every aspect of religion and morality.

According to Nietzsche, religions and moral philosophies preach self-sacrificing values like servility and compassion. But these values go against our natural instinct for survival. Perhaps moral philosophy is actually a cultural disease that we need to rise above. For Nietzsche, the illness began with Judaism and reached its destructive potential with Christianity. The Christian values of gentleness, forgiveness, and mercy are against the competitive forces that drive the evolution of both man and society.

Nietzsche dreamed of a stronger man, a 'superman', whose understanding and maturity would be so complete that he did not need moral boundaries, he could sense for himself what was of practical importance. Such a man would be driven by a passion for life, and would aspire to the natural virtues of courage and strength.

Nietzsche thought that if mankind was the end product of evolution, then the strong should replace the weak, and intelligent thinking should replace ignorance and superstition. He claimed that history had proven only one universal value, 'the will to power'. The irresistible urge to take control was the guiding force behind all human endeavors. Even Christianity's most striking characteristic was its drive to take power and impose its will. Nietzsche believed that Christian morality was just a clever deception used by the weak to assert power over the strong.

The Antichrist One of the last books that Nietzsche wrote was called 'The Antichrist'. His earlier books were cryptic in order to disguise his true meanings, and many of his earlier ideas were undeveloped. But by the time he wrote *The Antichrist*, he had grown tired of his own dishonesty. In this book, Nietzsche wrote ...

What is good? Anything that makes us more powerful. What is bad? Anything that results from weakness. What is happiness? The feeling that power grows, that resistance is overcome. Not contentment, but more power. Not peace, but war. Not virtue, but strength and ability. What is more harmful than any vice? Compassion for the sickly and weak, in other words, Christianity.

The question is not "what should replace mankind as the next species?", as human beings are the conclusion, but rather what type of human being we should breed, we should will, as being more valuable, more worthy of life, more certain of the future. This more valuable type has existed often enough already, but only as an exception. His appearance has often struck terror into the hearts of others, and from their fear, the reverse animal has been bred - the domestic animal, the herd animal, the sick animal, the Christian.

Mankind in general is no stronger or smarter today than he was in the past. The idea of such progress is a myth. But there are some cases in today's world where a higher type of man has emerged. And compared to the rest of humanity, he is a kind of superman. Even entire races, tribes, and nations, can under certain circumstances represent such people.

Christianity must not be defended. It has waged a war to the death against this higher type of man. It has rejected all of his instincts, declaring them to be evil. The stronger man has been despised and treated like an outcast. Christianity has taken the side of everything weak, and has made an ideal out of opposing the preservative instincts of a strong life. It has corrupted the minds of even the most intelligent by teaching men to feel that intelligent ideas are sinful misleading temptations.

Christianity is a religion of charity and compassion. But such expressions of pity work against our natural instincts intended to preserve and enhance the value of life. They oppose the law of evolution by preserving what is ripe for destruction, by defending the homeless and the condemned. Under Christianity, compassion is called a virtue, it is the foundation of all virtues. Nothing in our unhealthy modern world is more unhealthy than Christian compassion.

The people of Israel once stood in a correct relationship to nature. Their God was an expression of their consciousness of power, of their delight in themselves, of their hope for themselves. In him they anticipated victory and salvation. But after being defeated, every hope in their God lay unfulfilled. They should have abandoned him, but instead they changed their conception of him. All good fortune would now be interpreted as reward, and all misfortune as punishment for disobedience. A most untruthful account of a supposed 'moral world order' in which the natural concept of 'cause and effect' was turned on its head.

Having falsified the concepts of God and morality, the Jewish priesthood did not stop there. They produced that masterpiece of falsification known to us as the Bible. With contempt for every historical truth, they translated their entire national history into religious terms. They simplified the psychology of every great event into the idiotic formula of obedience or disobedience to God.

Out of this false soil grew Christianity - a form of mortal hostility to reality in which neither morality nor religion have anything to do with the real world. Nothing but imaginary causes, like free will and sin, and imaginary effects, like redemption and forgiveness. An imaginary explanation of our existence with a complete lack of scientific understandings, and an imaginary psychology of nothing but self-delusions. This entirely fictional world has its roots in hatred of the real world.

Like most men who have studied history, I am largely tolerant when I look back at the madness of more than a thousand years of Christianity. But my feelings suddenly change when I consider our modern age. What was once tragic now becomes disturbing and offensive. It is a crime against nature to be a Christian today.

All of the concepts of the church are recognized for what they are, the most malicious fabrication for the purpose of denying nature and opposing natural values. The priest himself is recognized for what he is, a parasitic kind of human being who prospers only at the expense of every healthy form of life.

Everyone knows this and yet everyone remains unchanged. Where have the last feelings of decency and self-respect gone, when even our statesmen still call themselves Christians? When every proud, patriotic, and self preserving instinct in modern man is clearly anti-Christian, what magnitude of self deception must he be living under that he is still not ashamed to be called Christian!

Months after writing these words, Nietzsche went completely insane and spent the last ten years of his life as a vegetable being cared for by his mother and sister. In order to raise money, his sister devoted herself to promoting his books. His ideas gradually gained momentum among German thinkers.

By the time of the First World War, the German army was distributing copies of Nietzsche's books to inspire the men in the trenches. One of the survivors of the war was a corporal named Adolf Hitler. Nietzsche's sister later became a prominent member of Hitler's Nazi party.

Darwin After sailing around the world for five years on a British science expedition, and after more than twenty years of careful research and writing, in 1859, Charles Darwin published "The Origin of Species" in which he explained that life on earth evolved through a slow process of random mutation and natural selection.

Darwin understood that his theory would provoke serious controversy, and so he did not dare to discuss the evolution of humankind or the philosophical implications that evolution might have on ideas of human purpose or morality. But as the theory of evolution slowly gained acceptance, other thinkers did begin to speculate.

The idea soon became popular that because evolution led to the rise of intelligent life, it was a process that generated something of value, and could therefore be equated with "progress for the better". It was believed that continued human evolution would lead to further progress, and so anything that aided this process could be thought of as 'good'.

It was believed that evolution would benefit from increased competition. The capitalist free market economy favored individual resourcefulness and was therefore considered to be good. Social welfare

was seen as helping the sickly and feeble-minded to survive and multiply, thereby working against natural selection and decreasing the future survivability of the entire species.

These kinds of ideas were promoted by conservative political elitists, not only as a way of justifying the inequalities between races, sexes, and classes, but also as a way of arguing for more aggressive economic policies that would favor their own special interests. Many conservatives argued that society's interests were best served by individuals acting out of pure self-interest.

All over the world, government health services interpreted evolution in a way that led to the sterilization of people with physical and mental handicaps. But the power to decide who should be sterilized was regularly abused, and such policies usually led to unfavorable outcomes.

Some people even argued that evolution justified the imperialistic competition for global resources, which often erupted into war between nations and the subjugation of defeated populations. They claimed that such conflict favored the survival of the fittest and was therefore an effective form of natural selection.

This way of thinking reached its destructive potential with the Nazi conquest of Europe and their policy of racial purification through extermination. After the defeat of the Nazis, the dismemberment of the European empires, and the end of institutionalized racism, the idea that some people are more highly evolved than others and are therefore more valuable was universally condemned and abandoned.

Moral evolution In an effort to counter the common misconceptions about his theory, Darwin wrote a book called "The Descent of Man" in which he expressed his own views about the moral implications of human evolution.

Darwin wrote that many animals have evolved innate social instincts that guide their group behavior and help to strengthen their social cohesion. These instincts evolved because living in groups gave these animals an evolutionary advantage.

Human beings also survive better in groups, and so we also evolved social instincts, some of which take the form of fond affections and sympathetic feelings. These social instincts make group living more effective and harmonious. But because we also possess higher intelligence and the ability to speak, our social instincts work together with our intelligence to create something that Darwin called our 'moral sense'.

The way that we care, understand, and sympathize with each other helps us to cooperate towards our common survival, and so our moral sense has continued to evolve and strengthen to the extent that we now generally see ourselves as contributors to our family and community rather than as separate selfish individuals.

Darwin wrote that our ability to reflect on the things we do and our reasons for doing them, and our inclination to approve or disapprove of others as well as ourselves, forms something beyond our 'moral sense' that he called our 'moral conscience'. Our moral conscience was the "the supreme judge and monitor" of every action.

Darwin never suggested that we should do anything to influence the course of evolution. One of Darwin's closest friends and supporters was the philosopher Thomas Huxley, who played a major role in helping to promote and defend the theory of evolution.

Huxley argued that science was morally neutral, and he vigorously attacked anyone who claimed that evolution should be used to justify discrimination or war. He was later given the nickname 'Darwin's bulldog'.

Agnosticism Huxley invented the term 'agnostic' to describe the belief that there is no conclusive evidence to either prove or disprove the existence of God. An agnostic would say that there is no way to be certain about whether there is any higher purpose behind our existence.

For thousands of years, philosophers have argued about the existence of God, but nobody has yet delivered a compelling case. Although everyone is entitled to have their own opinion, opinions do not count as scientific evidence, and it would be unscientific to commit to any unproven conclusions.

Huxley said ...

When I reached intellectual maturity and began to ask myself whether I was an atheist, a theist, or a pantheist; a materialist or an idealist; or a Christian or a freethinker, I found that the more I learned and reflected, the less ready was the answer; until at last I came to the conclusion that I had nothing in common with any of these denominations except the last.

So I took thought and invented what I conceived to be the appropriate title of 'agnostic'. It came into my head as being the opposite of the 'Gnostic' of Church history, who professed to know so much about the very things of which I was ignorant.

Throughout his early years, Darwin followed the traditions of his society and regularly attended church. But his feelings slowly changed over time until he eventually lost faith in Christianity. Later in life, when explaining his religious views, he wrote that he had never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of a God. He said ...

An agnostic would be the more correct description of my state of mind. The whole subject of God is beyond the scope of man's intellect.

Einstein Albert Einstein was born to Jewish parents in Germany. After studying in Switzerland, he worked as a clerk in a Swiss patent office. Much of his spare time was devoted to studying theoretical physics, and from 1905 onwards he continued to publish scientific papers that would revolutionize our understanding of the universe.

Since the days of Isaac Newton, people had believed that time and space were constant, but Einstein showed that time and space were relative to the observer, and that only the speed of light remained constant. His theory of relativity used mathematical equations such as $E=mc^2$ to explain the relationship between time, space, energy and matter.

Other scientists were slow to accept his ideas, but eventually his work was so well received that he became an international celebrity. He lectured around the world, received honorary degrees, and was awarded numerous prizes including the Nobel Prize for physics.

After the Nazis rose to power in Germany, Einstein moved to the United States and became a leading campaigner for world peace and one world government. He supported the formation of a Jewish state and pleaded for harmonious coexistence between Jews and Arabs, but he declined an offer to become Israel's first president.

Einstein devoted much of his life to social and political causes, and many of his writings contain profound insights into philosophy and religion, but science always came first, and he spent his later years attempting to unify the laws of physics.

Einstein wrote that the earliest humans were driven by fear and ignorance to imagine the existence of spirits who controlled the forces of nature. They offered prayers and performed rituals in order to gain the favor of these spirits.

With the development of civilization, larger populations were driven by a desire for guidance and love. Community leaders formed the idea of a moral god who loves and protects his people, rewards and punishes them, comforts their sorrows, and preserves the souls of the dead.

In practice, most religions contain a blend of both fear and love, with more progressive religions tending more towards love. In both types of religion, the spirits or gods are described as having human qualities such as human thoughts and emotions.

Einstein wrote that there was another kind of religious experience that he called the 'cosmic religious feeling'; a feeling experienced only by the fortunate few. God is not thought of as having any qualities that can be explained in human terms, and God never interferes in the workings of nature. The cosmic religious feeling comes from a sense of being part of a mysterious universal order which reveals itself both in nature and in the world of thought.

The cosmic religious feeling is not explained in any book. Believers have no church, and so they are often accused of being heretics or atheists. But a hint of the cosmic religious feeling sometimes shines through in traditional religious writings. Einstein believed that this feeling was the strongest and most noble motive for scientific research.

During his life, Einstein was known to have said ...

Strange is our situation here on earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to divine a purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing we do know: That man is here for the sake of other men - above all for those upon whose smile and well-being our own happiness depends, and also for the countless unknown souls with whose fate we are connected by a bond of sympathy. Many times a day I realize how much my own outer and inner life is built upon the labors of my fellow men, both living and dead, and how earnestly I must exert myself in order to give in return as much as I have received and am still receiving.

A human being is a part of the universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest - a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

My religion consists of a humble admiration of the limitless superior spirit who reveals himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble minds. That deeply emotional conviction of the presence of a superior reasoning power, which is revealed in the incomprehensible universe, forms my idea of God.

I cannot imagine a God who rewards and punishes the objects of his creation, whose purposes are modeled after our own; a God, in short, who is but a reflection of human frailty. Neither can I believe that the individual survives the death of his body, although feeble souls harbor such thoughts through fear or ridiculous egotisms. Man would indeed be in a poor way if he had to be restrained by fear of punishment and hope of reward after death.

The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day.

Our sense of purpose Einstein said that although science can provide us with real knowledge about the universe, it cannot provide us with any reason for pursuing this knowledge, and it cannot provide us with any guidance for how to live. Science will never be able to determine our purpose.

Our sense of purpose, and the basis for our moral judgments, can only come from having faith in some kind of religious or philosophical ideology, and this is the role that traditional religion plays in the social life of man. If we were to question from where religion gets its authority, we can only answer ...

Religions exist in a healthy society as powerful traditions which act upon the conduct, aspirations, and judgments of the individuals. They are there as something living, without it being necessary to find justification for their existence. They come into being not through demonstration but through revelation, through the medium of powerful personalities. One must not attempt to justify them, but rather to sense their nature simply and clearly.

The highest principles for our aspirations and judgments are given to us in the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. It is a very high goal which, with our weak powers, we can reach only very inadequately, but which gives a sure foundation to our aspirations and values. If one were to take this goal out of its religious form and look merely at its purely human side, one might state it perhaps thus - the free and responsible development of the individual, so that he may place his powers freely and gladly in the service of all mankind.

Shattering the Sacred Myths - Chapter 8

Hinduism and Buddhism

A short history of eastern religion and the development of Hindu and Buddhist scriptures.

Three major river systems pass through the northern plains of India. The warm climate, rich soil, and annual flooding all combined to make this region an attractive place for early agricultural communities to begin settling around 5000 BC. The first cities in the region appeared around the Indus River Valley in the north west of India around 3000 BC, and by 2500 BC they were using bronze tools and weapons.

Some time around 1500 BC, Indian civilization was overtaken by an invasion of pastoral nomads from around the Caspian Sea, north of Persia. These people continued to flood into the region over several hundred years, conquering and settling among the native people. Hinduism developed as the religious beliefs of the native people merged with those brought to India by the new arrivals.

The new arrivals claimed racial superiority to the darker skinned natives, but their warlike ways resulted in a less stable society. In order to deal with the racial tensions, priests divided the population into a number of castes which were decided along the lines of race and color. Inter-marriage between the different castes was forbidden. You were restricted to live your life and do the work expected for the caste you were born into.

The highest caste were the Hindu priests, who maintained their position by controlling all of the religious beliefs and customs. These were followed by the warriors, the farmers and merchants, and the servants and laborers. The lowest caste were the war captives and slaves, whose status was so low that their mere shadow would supposedly defile a priest.

To maintain the caste system, the Hindu priests invented the idea of reincarnation. A person's behavior would be rewarded or punished with good or bad karma. After death, the person's soul would be reborn into a higher or lower caste depending on their accumulation of karma. By accepting one's place in society, and through devotion to duty, a person could supposedly increase their chance of reaching a higher caste in their next incarnation.

Hindu scriptures By around 800 BC, the essentials of Hinduism had been preserved in writing as a collection of prayers, hymns, and rituals known as the Vedas (meaning 'knowledge'). These writings reveal the gradual development of Hindu religious ideas.

Early writings were full of praise for many different gods. These gods represented the forces of nature and the various aspects of humanity. Later writings introduced the concept of a single universal god. This contradiction was solved by saying that the old gods simply reflected different characteristics of the one universal god. But many people still preferred to worship the old gods. The Vedas say ...

Who knows the truth? Who can tell how and from where this universe came into existence? If the gods themselves came after its creation, then who can know from where it all began? Perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not. The highest god who looks down from the highest heaven, only he knows, or perhaps he does not know.

A second collection of writings, called the Upanishads (which means "sitting at the feet of the master"), was written over the centuries that followed. These writings were built upon the spiritual essence of the Vedas. The Upanishads say ...

Beyond the spirit in man is the spirit of the universe, and beyond that is the spirit supreme. Nothing is beyond the spirit supreme. He is the end of the path, he is in everything, and he is beyond definition. When a mortal knows him, then he will find peace and be free from all sorrows.

According to the Upanishads, human consciousness has two parts. The first part is our individuality, which is a reflection of our selfish desires and is devoted to our daily survival. The second part is that part of us which is always honest, caring, and sharing. These selfless qualities, when they appear, are the same in every person, and they represent the supreme spirit working through us for its own purpose. Our individuality dies with our bodies, but the supreme spirit within us lives forever.

The idea of reincarnation was not compatible with the idea of the supreme spirit acting through us, but the two ideas were merged anyway for the sake of tradition. Reincarnation became the threat used against those who did not strive to become one with the supreme spirit. Each soul would continue to be reborn until all of its karma was resolved and oneness with the supreme spirit was attained through spiritual knowledge.

Hinduism today has no central organization, and the interpretation of scripture varies widely, with some groups preferring different gods and myths to others. People in India's north worship Vishnu (the preserver), while those in the south worship Shiva (the destroyer). Village farmers sacrifice animals seeking protection from vengeful lesser gods, while educated city Hindus meditate in contemplation of being one with the supreme spirit. Each person is free to find their own path to salvation, whether by devotion, austerity, meditation, or selfless service. Tolerance for what other people believe is the cornerstone of Hinduism.

Buddhism Around 500 BC, an Indian named Siddhartha Gautama began preaching against the less enlightened beliefs and rituals of the Hindu religion. He rejected the caste system and rejected belief in the gods. He taught that the path to spiritual enlightenment was to abandon all worldly desires. Siddhartha's teachings were well received, particularly among the oppressed lower castes, and he soon became known as the Buddha (the enlightened one).

According to the popular myth, Buddha was an Indian prince. After being born, his father, the king, was warned by wise men that he might one day leave the kingdom to become a great spiritual leader. The king tried to keep him inside the palace by providing him with the greatest of comforts and luxuries. But eventually Buddha discovered that life outside the palace was full of misery, and he was overcome by compassion for all the suffering in the world.

He renounced his royal wealth and left the kingdom to search for an answer to the problem of suffering. For a time, he followed the fanatical religious practice of denying himself all worldly pleasures and material possessions but even after years of living such an austere religious life, he found no answers.

Then one day, while resting beneath a tree, his mind supposedly woke into a higher state of consciousness. He saw that the path to enlightenment was not to completely reject possessions and pleasures, but rather to have no desire or emotional attachment to them.

The cause of all unhappiness is desire. Even the desire to live comfortably can lead to misery. When the soul is no longer tormented by desires that might never be satisfied, a person can lead a truly virtuous life, achieve a perfectly peaceful state of mind, and reach a level of consciousness known as Nirvana ('release'). It is not necessary to become a hermit or to stop doing the necessities of life, but it is essential to have no passion for doing them.

Buddha was thought to have said ...

Do not believe in anything, no matter where you heard it, or who said it, even if it has been handed down over the generations, or has come from your own imagination, unless after careful consideration it agrees with your own sense of reason, and is good for the welfare of all beings, only then should you believe it and follow it.

One of the earliest books of Buddhist scripture is called the Dhammapada (or "the path of truth"). It contains hundreds of verses that were attributed to Buddha over his lifetime of teaching. In this book, Buddha says ...

A single wise word that brings peace to the listener is worth more than a thousand speeches full of empty words.

A shower of gold pieces cannot satisfy the endless craving. And sensual pleasure brings little comfort and causes much suffering. The follower of Buddha finds joy in letting go of all desires.

The wise man leaves the path of darkness and follows the path of light. He leaves behind his worldly comforts to follow a life of freedom. In solitude that few enjoy, without sensual pleasures or possessions, his mind is cleansed of impurities. Those with understanding, who delight in letting go of all attachments, with pure minds, radiant with wisdom, in this life they reach Nirvana.

With peaceful thoughts, peaceful words, and peaceful actions, by understanding the truth, the holy man has found freedom. Without blind faith in false beliefs after having seen the eternal truth, and free from all ties, cleansed of impurities and without desires, he becomes the greatest of men.

Even royal chariots wear out, and the body too grows old and weak. But the virtue of the good never grows old, and so they continue to share their goodness. Those who in their youth did not live in harmony and self control, and those who did not gain spiritual wealth, they later look back on their lives with regret. They become like old water birds lingering around a lake without fish.

Do not do what is evil. Do what is good. Keep your mind pure. This is the teaching of Buddha.

Buddha traveled around India, preaching his ideas for more than forty years. He established communities of monks and nuns whose purpose was to follow the path to enlightenment by developing their compassion for all living creatures and by working towards the peace, happiness, and well-being of others.

Reincarnation was borrowed from Hinduism as a form of reward and punishment after death. Without any god to judge the wicked, the 'karmic winds' were said to carry people's souls to their next incarnation. Once a person's consciousness rises to the same level as Buddha, they no longer need to be reborn.

Buddha left behind no successor, so every monk had equal authority to interpret his teachings. In the centuries following his death, Buddhist monks turned his philosophy into a mystical science of enlightenment with many ordered principles, like the three trainings, the four noble truths, the eightfold path, and the thirty-seven qualities.

The Buddhist scriptures have continued to grow over the centuries to include hundreds of different books containing countless related myths, rituals, and superstitions. Buddha himself was elevated in the minds of many of his followers to become a godlike being.

Buddhism rose to prominence around 250 BC when a Buddhist emperor encouraged its spread throughout India and Asia. Buddhism embraced new influences as it adapted to Chinese, Japanese, and other foreign cultures. But it soon came under pressure in India from a revitalized Hinduism. It was eventually swept from India around the year 900 by Muslim invaders who despised the godless religion.

There are now dozens of different sects of Buddhism, each one following its own choice of scriptures. But you do not need to follow any particular scripture to be a Buddhist. You do not even need to believe in reincarnation. All that you need to believe in order to be a Buddhist is that desire is the enemy of the soul and the cause of all suffering.

The Bhagavad Gita A book called the Bhagavad Gita (or "song of the lord") was written around 200 BC by an unknown author. It restored Hinduism by addressing many of its weaknesses. It helped Hinduism to overcome the challenge posed by Buddhism by combining the best of Buddhist and Hindu ideas. It continues today to give Hinduism its best defense against other religions.

In order to preserve and popularize the book, it was inserted into an epic story about a civil war for control of an ancient kingdom. In the story, a soldier returns from battle to explain to the king that his army has been defeated and that all of his princes are dead.

The soldier offers the king comfort by telling him that Krishna, the living incarnation of God, rode with the opposing army. And he tells the king the meaning of life as it was revealed by Krishna before the battle began. Krishna says ...

I will tell you a supreme mystery, because your heart is pure. It is divine wisdom and when known you shall be free from misery and sin. It is the ultimate mystery of divine wisdom; it will purify you and make you righteous and bring you everlasting joy. But those who have no faith in this truth cannot be saved; they remain in the cycles of life and death.

I am the supreme spirit, the infinite source of all, and the eternal purpose. I alone am the creator, the maintainer, and the destroyer of all things. I planted the seed from which all living things grew, and my spirit is present within every living being. I am your destination, your sustainer, your master, your witness, your refuge, your guardian, and your friend.

Set your heart upon your work but never upon its reward. The wise work selflessly for the good of all the world. But the unwise need not be disturbed as they work for their own selfish ends; they are simply carrying out the work of nature. They might think that they are consciously acting for themselves, but in truth they are blindly moved into action by natural forces. Those who can see that most human activity is the result of natural forces, they strive not to become enslaved by these forces. With faith in me and with pure intentions, through doing good work, they find freedom.

When something is done as an offering, with no desire for reward, without lust, anger, or greed, and with no selfish intentions, then this action is pure. But when something is done with selfish desire, or feeling it is an effort, or thinking it is a sacrifice, then this action is impure. And anything that is done which arises from delusion, without considering the consequences, or the distress caused to others, or the loss to oneself, then this is a work of darkness.

There are men who have no spiritual vision and yet they speak about my spirit as they follow every word of their chosen scriptures, and they say, "there is no other truth than this". Their thoughts are darkened by selfish desires; their heaven is a selfish desire; they pray for pleasures, possessions, and power; things for which they deserve no reward. Only when their minds are free from such delusions, free from the contradictions of aging scriptures, in true divine contemplation, their understanding will grow beyond the limits of ancient scriptures and even scriptures yet to come.

Evil men do not understand what should or should not be done in their best spiritual interests. They have no faith in goodness and are driven only by greed and ambition. They say, "this world has no truth, no moral foundation, no God. It is the product of chaos, and we are the product of lust and nothing else". Believing this, these fools without souls undertake their works of evil to bring about the destruction of the world. Driven by their insatiable desires and deluded by arrogance and vanity, they commit themselves to pursue fleeting ambitions and engage in harmful activities. Their lives are overwhelmed by innumerable fears and anxieties. They live only for the pursuit of sensual pleasure, thinking this is all. Bound by countless desires and gripped by lust and anger, they do anything to gain wealth to spend on indulging their senses.

All those who believe in me and who trust in me, free from fear and anger, purified by divine wisdom, filled with my spirit, they shall become one with me. Give me your thoughts and devotion, completely dedicate your mind and body to me, and have me as your supreme goal, and you shall ultimately become one with me. Even if the greatest sinner is devoted to me, then he must be considered righteous, because he is on the right path; and he shall eventually become pure and reach everlasting peace. Whatever you do, or eat, or give, or offer, let it be an offering to me. And whatever you suffer, suffer it for me. In whatever way men surrender to me, they are rewarded accordingly. All mankind is in my service in everything they do.

Those who can see that the eternal spirit exists within the consciousness of all living beings, and those who can see that our temporary bodies exist to carry the eternal spirit, those people can see the truth. By seeing that the eternal spirit is present in every living being, a man does not consider himself to be unworthy of salvation, and he strives to live in oneness with the eternal spirit. Those who can see that all activities performed by the body are simply the work of nature, they understand that the eternal spirit within only watches this work. Those who can see that the diverse range of living beings all share the same spiritual nature, those people can see the ultimate truth.

When a man surrenders all desires that come to the heart and through faith in goodness finds the joy of God then his soul will have found true peace.

Shattering the Sacred Myths - Chapter 9

A Rational History of Islam

Muhammed's life story and a summary of what he believed. Details the spread of Islam through conquest.

Most of the Arabian Peninsula is a dry sandy desert. The early inhabitants lived a nomadic lifestyle, breeding camels and herding goats and sheep in the scrublands on the borders of the desert. The first settlements appeared around 2000 BC along the coastlines and in the rocky oasis regions along the coast of the Red Sea.

Arab society was organized into tribes, with each person depending on their tribe for survival. Each tribe attempted to maintain control over an oasis, and wars frequently broke out between tribes over access to fertile land and water. Battles between the tribes often led to cycles of murder and vengeance that lasted for centuries.

Trade between Persia and Egypt was carried by camel trains across the Arabian desert. Desert oasis towns grew into regional trading centers where Arab merchants traded spices and other commodities with the Syrians, Egyptians, and Persians. Merchants along the southern coast also traded goods with African merchants across the Red Sea.

A variety of religious beliefs existed throughout the Arabian peninsula before Islam. Some desert tribes believed in ancestral spirits and practiced human sacrifice, others worshipped the ancient goddess of fertility. Many believed in a supreme god and also in a number of lesser gods and goddesses who were his children.

Jewish tribes had long been settling throughout the peninsula. They owned some of the best land and maintained their wealth and power by controlling much of the trade, especially in metals and weapons. Christian missionaries were busy establishing churches in Arab cities, and many Arab tribes had converted to Christianity. Arab kingdoms in Syria and Egypt were devoutly Christian.

For over one thousand years, the Greek and Roman empires had battled against the Persian Empire for control of the Middle East. After the fall of Rome, the Greeks formed an alliance with Christian Arabs in order to defeat a series of Persian invasions. The Persians also formed alliances with Arab tribes, paying them to join the fight.

The Greeks believed that God was the Trinity, but Arab Christians rejected this idea, believing that God was a single entity. This dispute led to persecutions and assassinations and eventually the Arabs broke off their alliance with the Greeks. Regional power was now beginning to favor the Arabs, but in order for them to realize this power, they first needed to unite behind a common cause.

Mecca was an important religious center long before the appearance of Islam. Pilgrims journeyed from all over the region to worship the idols contained in its many sacred shrines. The most sacred shrine contained a black meteorite that was believed to have supernatural powers because it had fallen from the heavens.

Muhammad Muhammad was born around the year 570 in Mecca. His father died before he was born and his mother died when he was still a child, leaving him to be brought up by his grandfather and later by his uncle. As a young man, he traveled with the trading caravans from Mecca to Syria. When he was 25, he married a wealthy older widow and became the manager of her business interests.

Muhammad developed a passion for religion. For years he studied and discussed the Jewish and Christian scriptures and spent much of his time contemplating God in the hillside caves outside of Mecca. He formulated his own uniquely Arab interpretation of religion, based loosely on the biblical scriptures but also incorporating Persian ideas.

Abraham was the mythical forefather of the Jews. His faith in one universal God was said to have been so strong that God promised his descendents possession of the land of Israel. But the Jews had twice been removed from the land, supposedly because of their disobedience to God, and the Christians were guilty of corrupting the faith by claiming that God had a son.

Muhammad believed that the Arab people were also the descendents of Abraham through his first son to an Egyptian slave girl. Muhammad figured that if he could teach the Arabs to embrace Abraham's original faith in one God, then the Arabs could claim to be the rightful heirs to Abraham's religious tradition.

When Muhammad was about forty years old, he started preaching to his family and friends. He called his new religion Islam (meaning "surrender to God"). He claimed that it was not a new religion but rather an old one that had freed itself from the corruptions of Judaism and Christianity. Muhammad declared himself to be the last of the biblical prophets. Those who accepted Islam would be called Muslims.

Muhammad preached that there is only one God and that he is almighty and all-knowing, and that he represents justice and fairness, kindness to orphans and widows, and charity to the poor. And although God is compassionate, he will inflict harsh punishment upon those who defy him. Muhammad's words had the power to stir the emotions of those who listened ...

The righteous are those who believe in God, and the Day of Judgment, and in the angels, and the holy book, and the prophets. They share their wealth with their family, and with orphans, and the helpless, and with travelers in need, and with beggars. They attend to their prayers and give to charity. They are true to their promises, and are steadfast in trial and adversity and in times of war.

Such are the true believers. Such are the God fearing. They will be blessed and forgiven by God, and a generous provision shall be made for them. As for the unbelievers, it is the same whether you warn them or not, they will not have faith. God has closed their hearts and ears. Their sight is dimmed and an agonizing punishment awaits them.

The Day of Judgment The Day of Judgment was invented by the Persian prophet Zoroaster around 700 BC and it became the central theme of Persian religion. It was an effective way of instilling the fear of God into people, allowing priests to more easily control the minds of believers, even convincing them to sacrifice their lives for the sake of a heavenly reward.

The ancient Egyptians were obsessed with life after death, but the early Jewish prophets made no mention of it. They did not seem so eager to drag their religion into deeper superstition for the sake of a cheap morality. Although many early Christians were opposed to the Book of Revelations, its description of the Day of Judgment was eventually adopted by the Christian religion.

With the Persians and Christians both believing in heaven and hell, and with most other people being naturally superstitious about death, Muhammad embraced the Day of Judgment as the foundation of his new religion. Hope for reward and fear of punishment in the afterlife became his only solid argument for believing in God. He said ...

Every soul will get what it deserves on the Day of Judgment. On that day, a trumpet shall sound and the dead will rise up from their graves. The gates of heaven shall swing open and angels will surround the throne giving glory to the Lord. The earth will shine with the light of the Lord, and the book will be laid open.

It will be a day of disaster for the unbelievers. They will find their deeds written down in the book. Nothing will be missing from the greatest to the smallest detail. Every soul shall know what it has done and what it has failed to do, and every soul shall be treated accordingly, for God knows everything, even the innermost thoughts of men.

The righteous will return to the Garden of Eden, whose gates will open wide to receive them. They will be adorned with gold and precious jewels and dressed in robes of silk. Resting comfortably with modest virgins for companions, they will feast on abundant food and drink. This shall be your reward on the Day of Judgment. Our gifts can have no end.

But a terrible fate awaits the evil-doers. A voice will cry, "Cast into hell every hardened unbeliever, every opponent of charity, every doubting sinner. Hurl him into the fierce, tormenting flames!" Here boiling water shall be poured on their heads. Their bodies will be immersed in fire until their skin is thoroughly burned. They will burn here in hell, a miserable resting place, where they will drink boiling water, rotten blood, and other horrible things.

After Muhammad began preaching, many of his friends became enemies, despising him for speaking out against the shrines and other objects of worship that were attracting visitors to Mecca. "Are we to renounce our gods for the sake of a mad poet?" they asked. Over the next ten years, Muhammad continued to preach in Mecca, gathering around him a small but dedicated band of followers.

The Koran There were no important works of literature written in Arabic before Muhammad's time. Most stories were passed down by word of mouth. Muhammad composed verses which were at first committed to memory by his followers and were later written down by scribes to form chapters of his holy book, the Koran. He claimed to have been given his revelations by an angel named Gabriel, although references to the angel in the Koran are vague and open to interpretation.

Muhammad summarized the Jewish and Christian scriptures, adapting them to Arab ways. He offered the Arabs a simple interpretation of the Bible written in a style that was easy to understand. The Koran uses colorful language, switching rapidly from one subject to the next, repeating the same stories over and over with slight variations each time. Muhammad said ...

The Koran has been revealed to you in Arab language so that you may spread the word to other men, and so that they may give thought.

In this way, we have inspired you with knowledge of righteousness when you knew nothing about faith or scripture. We have made it a light to guide those who we wish to serve us. They shall now be guided along the right path, the path of God. All that is in the heavens and on the earth belong to him, and all things shall return to him in the end.

The Koran mentions most of the Bible's main characters from Adam and Eve to Jesus and Mary. Muhammad regarded Jesus as an important prophet but was outraged by claims that he was the son of God ...

Those who say that the Lord has fathered a son are preaching an outright falsehood. The very heavens above would crack open, the earth would break apart, and the mountains would crumble to dust before the merciful Lord ever fathered a son, because it is not in his nature to have one.

Muhammad rejected the importance of Christian forgiveness, instead preaching that revenge was the proper form of justice. He reasoned that crime would be discouraged by the fear of revenge. He failed to acknowledge that forgiveness is always the conclusion of careful thought, whereas revenge is only an expression of blind instinct.

War against Mecca The authorities in Mecca grew increasingly hostile towards Muhammad's new religion. Persecution against his followers became so intense that many of them were forced to flee. When the citizens of Mecca finally threatened to kill Muhammad, he fled north to the oasis town of Medina, where he was soon joined by hundreds of his followers.

An uneasy balance of power existed between Arab and Jewish tribes for control of Medina. Muhammad and his followers joined this power struggle by forming strategic alliances with other tribes. His position was strengthened by gaining converts.

Muhammad's conflict with Mecca intensified over the following years. His followers attacked Meccan trading caravans and Meccan forces lay siege to Medina. The Arab tribes in Medina forgot their old rivalries and united behind Muhammad. He promised them a reward in heaven if they undertook to protect him with their lives and accept him as their leader. He said ...

He who is prepared to die fighting for the cause of God, whether he dies or triumphs, he shall be richly rewarded.

Do you fear the heat of combat? Hell is hotter! Paradise is waiting for you!

Muhammad continued adding new chapters to the Koran, but the nature of his religion was changing. New verses reflected the thoughts of a warlord engaged in constant battle ...

Those who attack God and his apostle and spread disorder in the land must be put to death or crucified, or have their hands and feet cut off on opposite sides, or be banished from the land. They will be shamed in this world and harshly punished in the next, except for those who repent before you destroy them. For you know that God is merciful and forgiving.

The Jewish tribes in Medina were naturally skeptical about his claim to be one of their prophets. They ridiculed him and later conspired against him. His early respect for the Jews turned into bitter resentment. He used his growing power to banish one Jewish tribe from the city. He later accused the remaining tribe of treachery in his war against the Meccans and the men of the tribe were slaughtered.

Believers, do not take the Jews or the Christians for friends. They are friends only to each other. Whoever of you seeks their friendship shall be treated like one of them. God does not guide such wrongdoers.

Having established an Islamic government in Medina, Muhammad introduced new laws and punishments which covered everything from ownership of property to marriage and divorce. Some laws promoted equality and social justice, while others were simply reflections of the existing culture of tribal warfare and harsh desert justice.

The Muslims formed alliances with desert tribes and battled for control of the surrounding countryside. Jewish tribes offered fierce resistance against the growing Muslim army but were eventually defeated. Those who did not convert to Islam were put to the sword and their women and children enslaved.

Believers, make war on the infidels who dwell around you. Deal firmly with them. Know that God is with the righteous.

God has sent forth his apostle with guidance and the true faith to make it triumphant over all religions, however much the idolaters may dislike it.

No longer able to defeat the Muslims, the Meccans signed a peace treaty. But Muhammad was dissatisfied with the terms of the treaty and his army eventually marched into Mecca and its people and places of worship were converted to Islam.

As a concession to the old religions, Muhammad embraced existing religious traditions such as the feast of Ramadan and the pilgrimage to Mecca to see the sacred meteorite.

Muhammad's final years

Muhammad preached that it was the duty of all Muslim men to fight for the establishment of an Islamic world empire. He said that defeated populations must accept Islam or be put to the sword. Jews and Christians were to be offered the alternative of paying a special tax for being non-Muslims.

Muhammad later decreed that there should be no other religion in Arabia than Islam. Faced with a choice between conversion and death, some Christians chose to die, while many others converted their churches into mosques.

The Koran contains laws for managing slaves. Muslim men were permitted to keep any number of female sex slaves. This provided a strong motivation for his followers to go out and conquer in the name of Islam.

Arab men were traditionally allowed to take as many wives as they pleased. But Muhammad limited each man to only four wives. Muhammad said that God made men superior to women, and so women must always obey the commands and satisfy the needs of their husbands.

After the death of his first wife, Muhammad married ten other women. In one of the last chapters of the Koran, he admonished two of his wives for being jealous of his intimacy with a Christian slave girl. Before he died, he issued a special revelation forbidding any of his wives from marrying again.

In the years following Muhammad's death, there was some confusion about the contents of the Koran, with several different versions in circulation. An authoritative version was eventually issued by the ruling clerics and all other copies were burned.

Those who compiled the Koran were unsure of the original order of the chapters, so they were arranged in order of length, with the longest chapter first and the shortest last.

Early Arab conquest

Muhammad had succeeded in unifying the Arab tribes under a single leadership. He sent messengers to warn neighboring kings and emperors to embrace Islam, but he died before he could undertake any further conquests.

Convinced that God and history were on their side, an army of warriors on horseback set out to complete Muhammad's mission to bring the entire world under the political control of Islam. Any gold or other riches taken from the conquered lands were to be shared among the Arab tribes, encouraging them to stay in the federation.

The Muslims easily forced the Greeks out of Palestine, Syria, and Egypt. The largely Christian populations were tired of paying taxes to the Greeks. The Arabs among them welcomed their brothers and embraced the new faith, which was much less complicated than Christianity and much easier to believe.

The Persian Empire was also easily conquered. It had been weakened by decades of war and the inhabitants hated their corrupt and oppressive rulers. A rapidly expanding Arab empire based on equality and social justice promised to be a much more favorable place to live.

Sunni and Shiite

After Muhammad's death, the leadership of the federation passed on to his closest friends and companions. But after the assassination of their third leader, the authorities in Mecca argued over how to choose the next leader. Civil war broke out and Islam splintered into two main factions, the Sunnis and the Shiites.

The Shiites wanted the leadership to pass down to Muhammad's descendants. They believed that the highest religious leader is God's representative on earth with the authority to add to the message of the Koran.

The Sunnis wanted the new leader to be elected by the ruling clerics. They believed that the Koran is the final authority and that there must be no further revelation.

Muhammad's son-in-law ruled briefly before the commander of the Arab forces in Syria defeated the Shiites and gained control of the empire. He moved the capital to Damascus and his family ruled there for the next hundred years.

Late Arab conquest

The enormous riches gained from the early conquest had given the Arabs a luxurious standard of living. For the next few decades they feasted and made love to their slave girls until the population had increased sufficiently to make further conquest possible. Arab armies were soon pushing onwards in every direction.

They captured all of North Africa and then moved north into parts of Spain and Portugal. The Spanish lived under severe oppression and were happy to see their king defeated. A large Muslim army then crossed the mountains into the south of France before being pushed back by French forces.

Arab armies conquered Afghanistan, Pakistan, and parts of India before moving north into central Asia, finally being stopped by the Chinese.

By now the Arabs were less interested in converting foreigners to Islam. Defeated armies were either killed or enslaved. Breeding with captured slave girls was a more effective way to spread Islam. Those foreigners who saved themselves by converting to Islam were treated as second class citizens by the Arabs.

The infidels to the east were mainly Buddhists and Hindus. The godless Buddhists were pacifists and offered no resistance to the invading Muslim armies. The invaders destroyed the Buddhist monasteries and burned their books. Wherever they went, they killed the men and took the women and children as slaves.

The Hindus were able to offer some resistance, but were unable to prevent the establishment of Muslim rule over large parts of India. The defenders knew what they were up against. If it appeared

that a battle could not be won then the men would kill their own women and children and carry on fighting to the death.

A new Muslim empire

By around the year 750, a considerable tension had grown throughout the Muslim empire. The Arab tribes were no longer receiving their share of the profits from conquest. The Meccans accused the leadership in Damascus of abandoning Islam. The Shiites opposed the Sunni leadership. And those who had converted to Islam in conquered lands were demanding the same rights as Arabs.

Tensions erupted into a violent revolution which began in Persia and quickly spread throughout the rest of the empire. The Persian rebels fought to establish a new leadership which represented the aspirations of all Muslims, not just Arabs. After successfully overthrowing the old ruling dynasty, the capital of the empire was moved to Baghdad, and it was here that Islam reached the height of its power and prosperity.

The Hadith

Around 150 years after Muhammad's death, a number of books were written containing stories that were supposedly passed down by word of mouth to the descendents of Muhammad's companions. These books, known as the Hadith, quickly became the authoritative explanation of the Koran. Despite their questionable authenticity, they are still used today to clarify the details of the religion and its laws.

A collection of laws from both the Koran and the Hadith were compiled into a basic legal system known as Sharia. Sharia is a complete package, intended to be easily implemented in any conquered country. Islamic values were never meant to change, and so the laws were never meant to change either.

Science and philosophy

Arabic became the common language of the Islamic Empire, and the surviving works of Greek science and philosophy were translated into Arabic.

The Muslims established schools and libraries throughout their empire, and while the Church was prohibiting scientific enquiry in Europe, Muslim scholars were busy making important contributions to astronomy and medicine.

While European mathematics was being held back by the use of unwieldy Roman numerals, Muslim scholars had adopted the decimal number system and were busy making progress in the development of new mathematical techniques like algebra.

Some Islamic thinkers tried to introduce elements of science and philosophy into Islam. They wrote that although there can only be one truth, there may be two ways of looking at the truth, religion for the uneducated masses and philosophy for the educated elite. There should be no conflict between religious revelation and philosophical reasoning as long as they both reach the same conclusions about the existence of God.

Other Islamic thinkers rejected science and philosophy. They quite rightly observed that philosophical enquiry tends to drift towards atheism, and that the scientific viewpoint is not compatible with life after death. Permitting free inquiry might inevitably lead to the rejection of Islam.

Other sects

Over the centuries, cultural differences forced some groups to break away from mainstream Islam. They formed new religious sects, each with their own unique interpretation of Islam, differing on issues such as monogamous marriage, head dress for women, and variations of Islamic law. Some sects became more progressive while others became more conservative.

The Koran may be good at instilling the fear of hell, but it does not offer thinking people any easy path to spiritual enlightenment. After the spread of Islam, many open minded spiritual thinkers living under its influence were driven to look beyond conventional Islam for better ways of understanding God.

Some used drugs to expand their consciousness. Others achieved spiritual euphoria by dancing around in circles for hours on end. Many left their homes to seek solitude in the mountains and deserts. Through quiet contemplation, they attempted to transcend this worldly life and develop a sense of oneness with God.

The search for spiritual enlightenment under Islam led many to join a sect known as Sufism. Seeing religion as a liberating force instead of a moral burden, Sufi thinkers stressed that true religion was less about having blind faith in scripture and tradition, and more about developing an ever deepening appreciation of God through open minded contemplation of nature.

Jalaladin Rumi was an orthodox cleric in the 1200s who had his mind opened to Sufi wisdom by a vagabond preacher. Rumi embraced peace and love and became perhaps the most respected poet and philosopher in Islamic history. His words were compiled into a book in which he wrote ...

There are two worlds. There is the outer world which appears to exist, and seems solid and permanent, but in truth is an illusion. And there is the inner world that many people deny, and is invisible to the senses, and yet is real and eternal. Once your heart becomes pure and clear, it will become a mirror on which pictures will appear from beyond this earthly realm. Not only will such pictures appear, but also the image of the one who painted them.

Sometimes God shows us the way to go. Sometimes he shows us the opposite way. The work of religion is full of confusion. But it is not a confusion that turns us away from God, it is a confusion that leads us to drink from his love and become utterly intoxicated.

Knowledge about religion is bad for the spirit. Such knowledge is like borrowed money; it does not belong to the one who possesses it. Yet those who study religion wrongly believe that they are acquiring spiritual knowledge. You must become ignorant about religion. You must become ignorant about worldly matters too. In fact you must become completely insane. Whatever may be profitable to you, flee from it. Whatever may advance your interests, shun it. If anyone wants to keep you, curse them. Lend money to those who have no hope of returning it. Ignore danger and walk freely through places that others avoid. Throw away your reputation and be free from shame. Only when you can do all this will you have obtained true spiritual knowledge.

No human behavior is entirely right or wrong, whether it be anger or patience, innocence or deceit. Nothing is absolutely good or absolutely evil. The benefit or harm of everything depends on the situation. For this reason, knowledge is useful and wisdom is vital.

Although Sufism was based upon Islam and Sufi teachers often quoted from the Koran, those who strayed too far from the teachings of Muhammad were accused of blasphemy by conservative clerics and were either persecuted or killed. Rumi's writings are now banned in many Islamic countries.

The decline of Islam

The Mongol invasion of Persia in the 1200s marked the beginning of the decline of Islamic culture. Baghdad was conquered by the Mongols, its people were slaughtered, its wealth was plundered, and its libraries were destroyed. Central government came to an end and the Islamic Empire splintered into regional kingdoms.

Around the same time, new techniques in the production of paper made the Koran easier to copy, and as copies became more widely available, more Muslims were able to read and interpret it for themselves. Science and philosophy were soon denounced as heresy. For a growing number of believers, the truth had already been revealed in the Koran and anything not conforming to Islamic teachings must be condemned.

The Turks

After recovering from the Christian crusades, the Mongol invasions, and the bubonic plague, Turkish tribes began battling to establish a new Islamic empire. They gained control over much of the old empire, and in 1453, they captured the Greek city of Constantinople and made it their capital.

For the next few hundred years, Turkish armies fought an almost continuous holy war against the Christians, capturing Greece, Serbia, Hungary, and much of south eastern Europe. Twice they invaded

Austria, laying siege to its capital, Vienna. But each time they were beaten back by an alliance of European forces using superior heavy artillery.

The end of the empire

After seeing the revolutionary effect that the printing press was having in Europe, it was banned by Muslim authorities as a potential instrument of sacrilege and heresy. Without the free flow of information and ideas, the Islamic world soon became an intellectual, technological, and economic backwater.

As Europe emerged from the Christian Dark Ages, the Islamic world plunged deeper into its own darkness. Without modern technology, the Muslims suffered a long series of defeats against the Europeans. The Islamic Empire was eventually conquered and carved up after being defeated alongside the Germans in the First World War.

Shattering the Sacred Myths - Chapter 10

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Analysis of Ancient Beliefs

Outlines the historical patterns behind the formation of the traditional religions.

As animals evolved, their senses sharpened to collect more information from their surroundings. Their brains made good use of this information by forming a rough mental picture of the world around them. Animals needed more than just blind instinct, they needed a mental picture of their situation in order to make limited predictions about what might happen in the next moment.

As the brains of our ancestors evolved to become larger, they developed the potential to stretch their imaginations to encompass a much wider and more detailed picture of the world. Speech allowed them to share their perceptions with others. Rather than having to develop their own view of the world through experience and guesswork, children simply listened and absorbed the understandings of their family or tribe.

Our natural instincts evolved over millions of years to control the balance between how much we cooperate and how much we compete against those around us. But as the human brain evolved to depend more on learning and less on instinct, it became more flexible in how it could be trained to behave, and the ability to speak made human interaction too complicated for our natural instincts alone to be able to successfully guide our social behavior.

As we grow up, through interacting with our family, our friends, and with the wider community, by imitating role models, by being rewarded, and by making mistakes, we generally learn how to behave like cooperative members of our community. As adults, our social behavior continues to be regulated by feelings of affection and fear.

Many of the decisions that we make in life are based on ideas about justice, common sense, and other principles and values about right and wrong that we learn from the traditions of our society. These principles and values have developed over the generations in accordance with how individuals see their place in society, and how society sees its place in the wider world.

Communal beliefs

In prehistoric times, simple dreamlike explanations of life and death, and practical rules and values about right and wrong were passed down through countless generations by word of mouth. They were embedded in the common tribal culture in the form of language, laws, myths, legends, and ritual songs and dances.

With the appearance of farming villages and the subsequent rise in population, and with the settlement of cities and the building of empires, there was an increased need for palaces and temples to establish laws, beliefs, and values which promoted greater cooperation between people from

different regions, who sometimes spoke different languages, and who were no longer connected by a common bond of familiarity.

Throughout the ages, priests, prophets, and philosophers have devised a variety of innovative solutions to convince the masses to restrain their desires and to think and act more cooperatively than they may have been naturally inclined to. In the interests of higher civilization, it was hoped that people could be discouraged from continuing with harmful evolutionary strategies like the unrestrained competition for resources and the extermination of competing tribes.

Life after death

Human consciousness flows in a continuous stream, working to recognize patterns in the sounds, visions, and other sensations carried into the brain from the senses. Despite knowing that we cannot live forever, it is often hard to contemplate how our stream of consciousness could ever end. Our attachment to the joys of life, our instinct for survival, and our active imaginations sometimes make us hope for another state of consciousness beyond the grave.

Although many people reject the idea of life after death, and others regard it as too uncertain to depend upon, since the formation of the earliest religions, few priesthoods have resisted the temptation to exploit people's anxiety about death by promising a reward or threatening some form of punishment in the afterlife, as a way of encouraging self-restraint and inducing greater obedience from their followers.

Judaism

Multitudes of gods might have seemed to be the obvious way to explain the mysteries of nature, but it is not easy for priests to convince people to cooperate when their beliefs are based upon myths about gods behaving badly towards each other. And when different cities honor different gods, people just have one more excuse to kill each other.

With the onset of the Iron Age, while the moral development of every other nation in the Mediterranean region was being held back by myths about incestuous families of cruel and ambitious gods, the priests of Israel dared to take advantage of the newly discovered power of alphabetic writing to persuade their population to adopt a more refined level of superstition.

Using sober language, they crafted a detailed mythology, with a single god, a convincing creation myth, and a declaration of ten sacred commandments: Do not murder; Do not steal; Do not lie; and so on. Using a collection of myths about miraculous events, the priests had succeeded in uniting their people under a common belief and giving them a practical set of laws and values.

The people of Israel no longer needed such a strong central authority to enforce the laws. Whoever believed in the mythology would themselves become the law keepers. And rather than ruining the nation to satisfy their own ambitions, kings would be held accountable to the same standards of behavior as commoners.

The Jewish strategy proved to be so effective that the Greeks, Romans, and Arabs eventually followed their lead, convincing their own people to adopt a single moral god of creation by building upon the successful foundations of the Jewish mythology.

To the credit of the early Jewish prophets, they continued to focus on punishment for the wicked in this life, and were never desperate enough to allow their scriptures to descend to the level of threatening punishment in the next life. The early Jewish scriptures only ever said that when we die, "our dust returns to the earth as it was, and our spirit returns to God who gave it."

As the centuries passed, additions were made to the scriptures to reinforce the better aspects of the religion. But whenever priests start making up rules, they often become tempted to regulate every detail of people's lives. When less enlightened laws and values become entrenched in religious scripture, they become very difficult to change without abandoning the whole tradition.

Greek philosophy

The ancient Greeks had been passing down entertaining stories about heroes and gods, but many Greeks were unconvinced by the fairytale nature of their traditional religious myths. They also

questioned the dubious morality of their gods. Greek religious morality was largely a failure anyway. The Greek economy depended entirely upon slavery, and Greek cities were constantly at war with each other. Peace between the cities was only ever achieved through domination by military force.

Driven by curiosity and a sense of duty to the truth, a few dedicated Greeks applied themselves to think carefully about what they observed in nature, hoping to develop a clearer picture of how things really worked. Their speculative writings inspired others, and the idea soon spread that there may be natural rather than supernatural explanations for the workings of the universe.

With the decline of Greek religion, stories about the gods were no longer useful for convincing people to believe in any higher form of justice. Justice came to be seen as more a matter of opinion, especially the opinion of those who had the power to impose their will.

Plato tried to restore people's faith in an absolute goodness by writing about a higher realm of reality where a perfect form of justice existed as an eternal standard. Plato understood that without such faith, in a world where cooperative moral values could never be proven to be true, it became the noblest pursuit of philosophy to convince people to care as much about their community as they do about themselves.

But there were many Greeks who rejected both religion and philosophy. They were well aware that almost everything that we once believed to be true was later shown to be false, and the values that we passionately hold on to are only ever relative to the times in which we live. Some skeptics did not even want to believe that there was nothing worth believing in, because then they might have been accused of believing in something.

Others with a more idealistic outlook were popularizing the two fundamental and opposing views of our existence: the idea that we have no cosmic purpose and so our efforts are best spent seeking a comfortable life; and the idea that we do have a cosmic purpose, so we should devote all of our energy to pursuing this purpose without complaint.

These and various other schools of thought accumulated generations of writings, some of which was profound, but most of which was childish and confusing. In any case, these writings were only ever accessible to the fortunate few. The vast majority of people continued to follow their traditional religions and other popular forms of superstition.

Greek philosophy failed to produce one enduring document which presented a clear and agreeable picture of the world. Something which could satisfy the emotional needs of the masses and give them guidance for how to live. A work of literature that could be used by the political establishment to convince their people to accept moral restraint. A metaphysical and moral guidebook that would be final and unquestionable.

Christianity

Under the Roman Empire, wars of conquest were fashionable. Conquering armies raped and pillaged their way through foreign lands. Entire populations were exterminated. Slavery was unquestioned. Emperors governed through terror and corruption. The poor and unfortunate starved. And people were slaughtered for entertainment.

Those with more enlightened principles were anticipating a revolution of the spiritual kind. Christian ideas were not new, but they were given a new voice in the character of Jesus Christ, who became the mythical embodiment of everything that centuries of moral philosophy had embraced as righteous and holy. God was said to have appeared in the flesh to teach us right from wrong and to mark the beginning of a new age of peace and love.

Only the Jewish prophets had made the right preparations for such a credible and enduring messiah. The Jewish scriptures may have been loaded with dubious history, and they may have lacked any serious philosophical substance, but they did contain the best loved creation myth of all time, and they did demonstrate the longest continuous history of undying faith in one universal god.

Using the Greek translation of the Jewish scriptures as their foundation, enthusiastic followers wrote their own accounts of the life of Jesus, combining every admirable demonstration of divine power, love, wisdom, and compassion, and using every technique in the art of religious persuasion to satisfy

the widest possible spectrum of hopes, needs, and expectations. An influential collection of letters was forged to clarify the details. Centuries were taken to revise and select the most suitable scriptures.

Christianity gained widespread acceptance among Greeks and Romans who were dissatisfied with the impotence of their official religions. It was particularly popular among the poor and oppressed because it preached that everyone was equal in the eyes of God, and it gave people hope for happiness after death.

Its message appealed to those of a gentle disposition. The Christian scriptures were a passionate plea to embrace the highest possible moral ideals. By having faith in these high ideals, fair minded and innocent citizens would gain their best defense against the entrenched corruption of the ancient world.

Christianity stepped well beyond the practical morality of the Jews, declaring instead an idealistic morality which was perfectly cooperative but entirely impractical. It was said that not only should you give all of your possessions away to the poor, you should give them away to the greedy as well. And if someone attacks you, you should never fight back, keep giving them all of your love and care instead, and unconditionally forgive them for the damage they cause you.

It was never intended that people should live exactly according to these rules, they would not be able to survive if they did. It was more a matter of trying to make people aware that any other kind of behavior; any proud, selfish, violent, lustful, or competitive behavior is merely a form of social corruption caused by the material necessities of this earthly existence acting upon our animal instincts.

It was the kind of morality that people would only believe if it came directly from the mouth of God. And apart from a few oppressive distortions, it had a peaceful and loving kind of sophistication that many people would have expected from the mouth of God. In a truly Christian kingdom, everyone would work together for a common cause, nobody would serve their own interests, and every resource would be shared without question for the common good.

Unfortunately, by building one set of myths upon another, the price paid by the Christians for their innovative morality was the acceptance of a twisted mythological delusion as their explanation for the workings of the world. Christian conceptions of history and human nature had almost nothing in common with reality.

Rational and philosophical thinkers were mortified by this new development. Fearful of the deepening social and political division that it caused, some Roman emperors tried unsuccessfully to destroy it. Despite suffering periods of persecution, Christianity endured, and one embattled general saw it as his path to power. The whole Roman Empire was eventually united under a Christian understanding of existence.

Soon afterwards, weakened by their newfound love for their enemies, and under fierce attack from invading hordes, the empire began to collapse. As delusions of heaven and hell replaced rational Greek science, and as justice in this world was replaced by justice in the next world, the entire region descended into a dark age. No claim to knowledge other than what was written in the Bible would be tolerated again throughout the remnants of the empire for more than a thousand years.

As the power of the Catholic priesthood grew, self-preservation forced it to become the opposite of what it preached. By the time of the Inquisition and the Protestant Reformation, it had grown power hungry, oppressive, and opposed to knowledge and freedom. Most of its energy was devoted to hoarding wealth. It would stop at nothing, even resorting to the extremes of terror and bloodshed in order to keep its grip on power.

Islam

The ancient Arab tribes were strong, but their traditional beliefs were primitive and offered little guidance. Tribesmen knew no better than to fight each other for limited desert resources. As the charismatic leader of a band of Arab reformers, Muhammad seized an opportunity to unite the Arab tribes under a persuasive interpretation of Judaism and Christianity.

Muhammad was drawn into war with the Jews, and he rejected Christianity for preaching two gods instead of one. Muhammad's new religion was simple and instinctual. One god who created the earth, believers would be rewarded in heaven, infidels and transgressors would be punished in hell. His fire

and brimstone speeches and saber rattling rhetoric were stitched together by his band of warriors after his death to create the Koran, a metaphysical blueprint for Arab world domination.

Muhammad's moral laws were practical, providing comprehensive guidelines for cooperation between believers. On the one hand, the Koran promoted equality between men, with particular care for the poor and the orphaned. On the other hand, it enshrined the laws of harsh desert justice, with amputations and executions for the guilty. And it reinforced male domination by teaching that women were little more than childbearing domestic servants and sex slaves.

Muhammad's life story was a powerful example of how to compete with the followers of other beliefs. For hundreds of years, the message was spread by conquering the infidels. Islamic scholars divided the world into the 'House of Islam' and the 'House of War'. Only when the entire world is united under Islamic control will this war ever end, and even then, peace would be unlikely.

In many ways, Islam has been a highly successful strategy for the Arabs. Liberated from the fear of death, believing they will be rewarded with endless pleasures in heaven, militant extremists dedicate their lives to spreading Arab language, law, and culture, and increasing the power and wealth of the Meccan elite.

Asian philosophy

Cultures that adopted alphabetic writing, like those around the Mediterranean, were partly enlightened by the preservation and spread of complex concepts, and partly condemned by the inevitable development of holy books. These books each described their own final and unquestionable view of the world. New ideas were limited to the scope of the prevailing religious world view. Innovative ideas were condemned as heresy.

Cultures that never progressed beyond using pictures to represent words, like the Chinese and Japanese, were less able to construct elaborate mythologies and theologies. Rather than believing in an interventionist God, Asian scholars wrote about an impersonal heaven from which the laws of nature sprang, providing a foundation for justice and morality. The emperor was often worshipped as the 'Son of Heaven', but there were no oppressive holy books and there was no fear of damnation.

Many Asian peasants instead continued to believe in ancestral spirits and other primitive superstitions. At best they followed simple words of wisdom. The undisputed master of Chinese wisdom was Confucius, who lived around 500 BC. Confucius concerned himself with the interactions between people. He tried to describe an ideal system of human behavior in which the needs of the community would be valued over the desires of the individual.

Confucius believed that social harmony can best be achieved by encouraging people to follow rules of respectable behavior. His moral guidelines were simple: honor your parents and respect other people; choose to do what is socially right instead of what is personally advantageous; and do nothing to anyone else that you would not want done to you.

Confucius said ...

A good person thinks about virtue, lesser people think about wealth. A good person strives to uphold justice, lesser people scheme to gain advantage. The virtuous are never alone, they soon gain friends; but those who act only through self interest inevitably lose the respect of others.

If people are restrained only by the threat of punishment for breaking the law, they will never develop a true sense of right and wrong. When they are shown by example how to follow rules of good conduct, they will be ashamed of doing wrong and be inspired to do what is right. Whoever learns how to refine his behavior and act with restraint will never do wrong.

Confucianism did not need myths about miracles or threats of punishment in the afterlife in order to encourage restraint, only the cult of a man of great wisdom. His followers established a system of schools across China, and through control of the education system, they eventually gained control of the government bureaucracy and maintained their domination of Chinese political and cultural life for thousands of years.

Taoism developed as a metaphysical accompaniment to Confucianism, using naturalistic folklore to explain the ways of the universe. But many Chinese thinkers complained about the inadequacy of

words to describe any deeper realities. The limited ability of picture characters to represent complex concepts prevented the East Asian cultures from contributing anything more profound to the world of ideas.

One philosophy that did suit their language was Buddhism, and over the centuries, they absorbed various schools of Buddhist thought from India. The Buddhist abandonment of all desire makes cooperation simple and natural without needing specific rules for specific situations.

Although Buddhism preaches complete selflessness, this is only beneficial to society when practiced by a select minority (monks and nuns). Success for everyone else depends on finding a healthy compromise between survival, productivity, and cooperation.

Buddhism held similar appeal to Confucianism as a philosophy of peace and cooperation, but the strong cooperative spirit of the masses, inspired by Confucian and Buddhist ideals, was exploited by Chinese and Japanese imperial dynasties, who imposed tight control over every aspect of people's lives.

Strong central authority and restrictions on individual freedom provided internal peace and stability but stifled social, technological, and economic progress. As in communist China, North Korea, and Vietnam today, the masses are still the cooperative slaves of corrupt power elites.

Conclusion

Many traditional religions share the same underlying theme. They say that beyond the material plane of existence, at the very highest level of reality, there exists a governing spiritual force rather than a meaningless chaos or a mindless cosmic machine. They say that this spiritual force is ultimately responsible for the creation of the world and the existence of humankind.

They say that we can best serve the purpose for which we were created by recognizing the existence of this governing spirit and by devoting our lives to its service. They say that we can achieve the greatest sense of personal fulfillment by striving to become agents through which the spirit can act to carry out its will in the material plane of existence.

Different religions have different ideas about how best to serve the spirit, and for guidance, people have rarely had any other choice than to trust their local priesthoods. Despite their many failings, the priests have generally encouraged people to care for their community, work towards the establishment of justice and peace, and not to pursue their own selfish interests, but rather to work for the glory of the spirit and for the greater good.

Although your body may die and your consciousness may come to an end, they say that you can achieve a sense of immortality by having lived in the service of the eternal spirit, as though you were at one with it. But those who do not believe in the spirit are lost to the greater cause. They often become slaves to their own predictable ambitions, living only for the pursuit of personal gratification, sometimes to the detriment of those around them.

Many traditional religions share this underlying theme, but each religion deviates from the theme in different ways due to the different historical circumstances under which they were formed. They also deviate for reasons like the limited knowledge of their ancient authors, the difficulty of explaining complex concepts, the need to appeal to the illiterate masses, and the corruptions caused by power, wealth, and sensual desire.

Shattering the Sacred Myths - Chapter 11

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The Rise of Modern Democracy

The modern history of democracy from the American revolution through the world wars to the current world crisis. Shows world politics to be little more than a greed-driven struggle for wealth and power.

Most of human history has been spoiled by stories of ambitious men who were driven by cravings for wealth and power. Tyrants who conspired and murdered their way into power, and then became drunk with power, leaving behind trails of death and destruction. Brutal dictators who enslaved entire populations and then watched them starve while they spent fortunes on personal luxuries and military adventures.

History has shown that even those who rose to power with good intentions soon became corrupt. They took advantage of their position to enrich themselves and their family and friends. Then in order to protect their wealth and power, they silenced those who threatened their authority. As one injustice led to another, and as their friends became fewer, they grew increasingly paranoid and oppressive. They desperately clung to power in fear that if they lost control then they might also lose their fortunes, their freedom, and possibly even their lives.

Many were driven by blind ambition to invade and plunder the wealth of neighboring lands. More land meant more resources to feed larger armies and pay for even more ambitious military campaigns. Defeated populations were often enslaved or exterminated. Conquered lands were divided and shared between the families of those who commanded the invasion. Power and wealth became entrenched in these families to be passed down from generation to generation. Their descendents became royalty, many of whom continued to abuse their power until they were defeated in battle or overthrown by the victims of their oppression.

Royal families claimed the right to rule because they had descended from kings and conquerors. But in truth, the rights of these rulers depended entirely on their ability to maintain power by using armed force to crush opposition. Authority is only meaningful as long as it can be enforced. Sentiment for tradition is only effective as long as it continues to persuade.

Kings were always tempted to try to squeeze more tax out of their subjects, either to pay for a greater degree of courtly splendor or for greater military spending on their latest war or conquest. The only thing preventing them from imposing heavier taxes or more intrusive laws was the fear that opposing power centers might gain popular support.

Ambitious army officers supported by wealthy land owners were sometimes able to seize control of the army and overthrow the king. But being soldiers rather than statesmen, they often brutalized the people in order to tighten their grip on power. Wealthy landowners were only interested in protecting their assets and enslaving the peasantry as cheap labor.

Peasant rebellions and slave revolts usually only resulted in anarchy, looting, and murder. Those who rose to power on a wave of popular support sometimes claimed to have special knowledge or abilities which qualified them to govern in the best interests of the people. But even when revolutions were inspired by noble ideals, it was never long before the old corrupt ruling class was simply replaced by a new one.

Feudal society

Before the rise of industry, the vast majority of people were peasant farmers who lived in villages scattered across the countryside. The land was dominated by warlords and each village shared its harvest with the local warlord, who in return protected the peasants from raids and invasions.

The church also took a share of the harvest. By enforcing strict religious morality and by keeping peace between the warlords, they helped to protect the peasants from unnecessary cruelties and abuses. The relationship between the warlords, priests, and peasants was held together by feelings of fear, loyalty, and mutual obligation.

Very little changed over the generations. People followed customs and traditions that had been passed down from a time that was long before anyone could remember. Many believed that they were born to follow in their parent's footsteps. Choices were few and people rarely questioned their lot in life. Most people simply did whatever they were told to do by their elders, rulers, and priests.

The tools and techniques used by village craftsmen had long ago been perfected and very little improvement seemed possible. Nobody could produce anything more efficiently than anyone else. Transport was slow and difficult, so production was mostly local. Competitive prices in the

marketplace only led to reduced incomes, resulting in lower quality goods and services, which benefited no one. So craftsmen formed unions to protect their trade by enforcing fixed prices.

Gunpowder

Saltpeter is a white powder that sometimes forms around decaying vegetation. People discovered thousands of years ago that it can be used to make wood burn more easily. Sulfur can be found in natural deposits around volcanoes and hot springs. This yellow substance sizzles and pops when it comes into contact with fire. Some time before the year 1000, Chinese chemists discovered that mixing saltpeter, sulfur, and charcoal together creates an explosive powder that became known as gunpowder.

The Europeans learned about gunpowder through the Mongol invasions of the 1200s. The ceaseless military competition between Europe's warlords then led to continual improvements in the design of the cannon. By the 1500s, musketeers were beginning to replace swordsmen and archers on the battlefields of Europe. Gunpowder was the first in a series of major inventions that would overturn the traditional way of living and usher in the modern age.

English kings

After the fall of the Roman Empire, tribesmen from northern Europe invaded the island of Britain in continuous waves until the final invasion by the Normans in 1066. The Normans established a new kingdom and the land was divided among the chiefs of the conquering army, whose descendants ruled as warlords with the wealth to raise their own armies.

Whenever the king needed the support of the warlords on matters such as wars and taxes, he would call them together for a meeting. These meetings were called parliaments and they were mostly power struggles between the king and his warlords. Whenever kings were strong, they ignored the laws and increased taxes to pay for wars. Whenever kings were weak, the parliament restrained them and secured more power for themselves.

As cannons became essential weapons for smashing through castle walls, the warlords came to depend more on the king and the parliament to preserve their power. Parliament was divided into the House of Lords, which included the warlords and bishops, and the House of Commons, which included knights and representatives from the shires and towns.

Power struggles continued until the 1600s when a Catholic king, Charles I, ignored his Protestant parliament and declared that kings had a divine right to rule as they pleased. Hostilities between the king and the parliament continued to escalate until 1642, when all of England erupted into a long and bloody civil war.

Parliament raised a powerful army which eventually crushed the royalist forces and the king was later executed for treason. Under the command of a parliamentary leader named Cromwell, the army then seized control and England was ruled for a number of years by an oppressive military dictatorship.

After one final bloodless revolution, the throne was given to a Dutch prince, William of Orange, in return for his acceptance of a Bill of Rights. This was a declaration of laws that increased the power of parliament, limited the power of kings, and gave the common people certain rights and freedoms that could never be taken away by anything less than civil war or foreign invasion.

Being an island made Britain harder to invade, making it a more secure place in which freedom could grow. Relative freedom of speech and freedom of enterprise allowed the culture to flourish and the economy to surge ahead of the other authoritarian monarchies of mainland Europe.

Colonization

When the crusaders returned from the Middle East, they brought back Chinese silks, Persian carpets, sugar, spices, and other exotic goods which were previously unknown in Europe. The growing demand for these luxury imports led to the launching of a final crusade, to conquer Constantinople and the eastern half of the old empire. This gave Italian merchants control over the trade routes to Asia, and Italian cities soon grew famously wealthy.

As Turkish armies fought to establish a new Islamic empire, the Italian trade routes became increasingly difficult to protect. After the Turks captured Constantinople in 1453, all trade between Europe and Asia was taken over by Muslim merchants.

Improved shipbuilding techniques and new navigational instruments like the magnetic compass allowed Portuguese ships to begin exploring the Atlantic. By the 1500s, they had discovered how to sail around the coast of Africa to reach the trading cities of southern Asia, effectively cutting out the Muslim middleman. Although the Europeans had very little of any value to trade, they possessed vastly superior firepower which they used to plunder the riches of the Asian coast.

Spanish ships sailed west across the Atlantic hoping to find an easier way to reach Asia. But instead of bringing back spices from India, they returned with vast amounts of silver and gold plundered from native American cities. Spain was soon the wealthiest kingdom in Europe.

Lured by huge potential profits, Dutch shipbuilders began building bigger and faster ships with heavier firepower. After establishing their own trade links with Asia and America, Dutch ships soon dominated world trade, and Dutch cities became the financial and cultural capitals of Northern Europe.

As France and England joined in the rush to colonize new lands, the oceans erupted into open warfare. With so much new wealth to plunder, the old Christian loyalties were soon forgotten. Europe began to tear itself apart as the northern states battled to free themselves from Catholic control. War raged for centuries from one side of the Atlantic to the other as Europe's kings and warlords led a slaughter for power and wealth.

Christian missionaries played a vital role in the conquest of America and other newly discovered lands. Natives who refused to convert were often killed, and for those who did convert, there were no guarantees of mercy. Many were enslaved and worked to death in the gold and silver mines.

The American Revolution

The English established colonies along the east coast of North America, but by the mid 1700s, the military and economic interests of the Americans were no longer compatible with those of the English. After the English king increased taxes in America to pay for his European wars, the resulting riots and rebellions throughout the American colonies forced the king to tighten his grip on power until the oppression became intolerable.

Thomas Paine was a bold political writer who arrived in America in 1775. Sensing that America's loyalty to England had been stretched to breaking point, he wrote a radical pamphlet called "Common Sense" in which he explained that hereditary kings were greedy warmongers and that the English only cared about their own national interests. It was time for Americans to assert themselves in the world, to trade with whoever they wished, and not to allow England to drag them into any more senseless European wars.

Paine called for Americans to declare their independence and establish a democratic government based upon freedom and equality. His pamphlet immediately converted hundreds of thousands of Americans to the cause. With the outbreak of war, Paine joined the army and continued writing to bolster the national courage, even when the cause seemed lost ...

These are the times that try men's souls. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered - yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. Whatever we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly. Heaven knows how to put a proper price on its goods, and it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as freedom should not be highly rated.

During the war for independence, the American states began experimenting with democracy. There was an immediate concern among the wealthy that too much democracy would give the majority of people the power to vote away the wealth of the minority. Some states soon discovered that unrestrained democracy made it too easy for people to oppress themselves with an excess of unworkable laws.

Several years after winning the war for independence, a national convention was held to draft a constitution for the United States of America. Delegates to the convention wanted to permanently limit the power of the new federal government, knowing that politicians would be forever scheming to bypass the constitution to tighten their grip on power. The delegates wanted to create a political

system that could only ever descend into corruption and oppression if the American people themselves became so corrupt that they needed an oppressive government to rule them.

Using the English system of government as a model, with a congress of regional representatives, a senate of state representatives, and an elected president instead of a king, they created a balanced democratic system in which each new law would need to pass through three levels of government before being interpreted by the courts. The idea was that by making it hard to pass new laws, they would also be making it harder to pass bad laws.

The United States of America was founded in 1787 when the new constitution became the supreme law of the land. But the new constitution favored wealthy landowners who had managed to secure most of the political power for themselves. Over the next decade there was an intense political struggle to reform the constitution.

Reformers led by Thomas Jefferson had learned their lessons on political and religious freedom from the wars, persecutions, and other oppressions which had ruined Europe for centuries. They eventually succeeded in amending the constitution to guarantee rights like freedom of speech and freedom of religion.

The establishment of a strong nation requires more than just a good constitution, a colorful flag, and an inspiring national anthem. It also requires the passing down of legends about the heroes who built the nation. Legends like the Boston tea party, Paul Revere's ride, George Washington's cherry tree, and Thomas Jefferson's bible.

As the symbols, traditions, and myths build up over the centuries, they help to enflame the patriotic passions of the people, giving them a common sense of identity, uniting them behind a common purpose, and making them believe that their land is sacred and their constitution is worth more than just words on a piece of paper.

The French Revolution

By the 1700s, France had become the most powerful nation on the European mainland. French kings took advantage of their nation's economic strength by imposing steep taxes and borrowing heavily in order to spend lavishly on extravagances and military adventures.

One king, Louis XIV, built a luxurious new palace while his armies battled for control of Europe and North America. His successor, Louis XV, plunged the monarchy even deeper into debt while scandalizing the nation with an endless series of tawdry love affairs.

Around the same time, French philosophers were writing that all men were equal and had a right to be free. They championed rights like freedom of speech, and they condemned the hereditary aristocracy and the oppressive behavior of the church. Revolutionary ideas were beginning to ferment in the minds of the French people.

By 1788, the next king, Louis XVI, was so burdened by debt that he needed to raise new taxes in order to avoid economic collapse. But the common people of France, the farmers, merchants, and laborers were already overtaxed and could afford no more. On the other hand, the aristocrats and church officials paid no tax. They maintained their power by controlling the law courts, and the king failed in every attempt to tax them.

The king summoned a meeting of the French parliament (then known as the Estates General) to discuss the problem. It was the first such meeting in more than 170 years. The meeting consisted of representatives from the church (the first estate), the aristocracy (the second estate), and the common people (the third estate).

The three groups argued about what to do. The third estate was excluded from much of the debate, and so instead of discussing taxes, they began to discuss how they might gain a greater share of power. After their demands were rejected, they declared themselves to be the National Assembly, the true representatives of the French people, and the population of Paris soon rose up in open rebellion. As the revolution gained momentum, the aristocracy was abolished and the king was forced to sign a new democratic constitution based on liberty and equality.

Many of the ancient customs were thrown out by the revolution. Archaic systems of measurement were replaced with a new metric system based on multiples of ten. A new French calendar was declared with ten months in a year and ten days in a week. Even the numbering of the years was changed so that 1792 became the year 1.

The new revolutionary government raised funds by confiscating church property. All priests became employees of the state. Several attempts were made over the following years to replace Christianity with a new state religion based on the principles of natural religion as taught by the enlightenment philosophers.

Fearing the spread of the revolution, the kings of Europe joined forces to invade France and restore the monarchy. Meanwhile, driven by their newfound passion for freedom, the French army marched into Europe to liberate the oppressed masses from the tyranny of kings and aristocrats. Every available man and horse was drafted into the war effort and France soon had the largest army in Europe.

Amid growing hostility at home and abroad, the king was executed for treason. Faced with increasing civil unrest, the assembly was overtaken by revolutionary extremists who imposed harsh laws and instigated a reign of terror. They executed aristocrats, opposition groups, atheists, the royal family, and anyone else they did not like. Thousands were publicly beheaded until eventually the extremists themselves were beheaded by the bloodthirsty mob.

A second democratic constitution was drafted in the hope of consolidating the achievements of the revolution while avoiding its excesses. But the old revolutionaries, who made up the bulk of the new government, overturned the results of elections, fearing what might happen to them if they lost power.

The government descended into the depths of corruption as politicians and army generals schemed to entrench their power and increase their wealth. Meanwhile, the war of liberation in Europe had degenerated into a rampage of looting. As the French economy disintegrated, the government came to depend more and more on the income from foreign plunder.

In 1799, after conquering Italy and invading Egypt, an ambitious army general named Napoleon Bonaparte returned to Paris to a hero's welcome. He quickly seized control of the government and embarked on a campaign to conquer all of Europe, eventually forcing the pope to crown him emperor.

For the next ten years, Napoleon reigned supreme over the European mainland. But his attempt to conquer Russia was a disaster. After a series of defeats, France was forced into unconditional surrender and Napoleon was sent into exile.

The royalty and aristocracy soon came creeping back into power throughout Europe, but the expectations of the people had forever changed, and many nations now adopted constitutions limiting the power of aristocrats and guaranteeing some rights for the people.

Thomas Paine

Thomas Paine had been a popular hero of the American Revolution. He later returned to England and published a book called 'The Rights of Man' in which he preached the need for democratic reform in England and throughout Europe. His book sold more copies than any previous book in the English language. He wrote ...

If universal peace, civilization, and commerce are ever to be the happy lot of man, it cannot be accomplished but by a revolution in the system of governments.

Paine became the most influential political writer of his time. He was soon invited to join the National Assembly of the French Revolution where he participated in drafting the new French constitution. When the reign of terror began, he was thrown into prison. While waiting to be executed, he wrote a notorious book called 'The Age of Reason' in which he savagely attacked the Christian religion. He wrote ...

I believe in one God, I believe in the equality of man, and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow creatures happy. But I do not believe in the creed professed by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church.

I have thought it exceedingly probable that a revolution in the system of government would be followed by a revolution in the system of religion. The connection between church and state has so effectively prohibited every discussion on the principles of religion, that until the system of government is changed, religious principles cannot be discussed openly before the world. But whenever change is done, then a revolution in the system of religion will follow.

Every national church or religion has established itself by pretending some special mission from God, which was communicated to certain individuals. And they each have certain books, which are supposed to reveal the word of God. And they each accuse the other of not believing the truth, and for my own part, I disbelieve them all. All national churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me to be nothing more than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.

Paine survived the reign of terror and eventually returned to America to find himself despised by the conservative ruling elite and condemned as a heretic by the Christian majority. The enormous influence that he once enjoyed had over-inflated his ego, which now seemed to self destruct as he turned to alcohol. He died with few friends, his grave was dug up, his bones were lost, and his name was removed from popular American history.

Slavery in America

The American war for independence had been inspired by the idealistic claim that every person has a God given right to freedom and equality, but in reality, any claims to freedom and equality in this world depend entirely on people's ability to fight for these rights, and to defend them against powerful interest groups who would take them away if they could.

Only wealthy landowners were allowed to vote in early American elections, but within a few decades, public protests and the threat of rebellion by workers and small farmers gradually forced the government to lower voting restrictions until the right to vote was extended to include almost every white male.

For the next hundred years, only white men had the right to vote, and they jealously refused to share this privilege. No other group could elect representatives to pass laws to protect them from exploitation. Women were generally treated like childbearing domestic servants, native American Indians were massacred and displaced, and African Americans were enslaved and treated like farm animals.

American politics was soon divided between two rival political parties. One party represented wealthy northern businessmen who wanted to abolish slavery. The other represented a coalition of southern slave owning cotton growers and underpaid white northern factory workers who feared having to compete with free black workers for jobs.

Frederick Douglass was raised as a slave in the southern states of America. He eventually escaped from slavery and became a leading campaigner against the slave trade, giving lectures to white audiences, publishing antislavery newspapers, and writing books about his experiences as a slave.

While condemning the churches for being the most vocal supporters of slavery, Douglass wrote ...

Between the Christianity of America, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference - so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked.

I love the pure, peaceful, and impartial Christianity of Christ. I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity.

We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members. The man who robs me of my earnings, at the end of each week meets me to show me the path to salvation. He who sells my sister for the purposes of prostitution stands forth as the pious advocate of purity. The slave dealer gives his blood-stained gold to support the pulpit, and the pulpit, in return, covers his infernal business with the garb of Christianity.

I would regard being the slave of a religious master as the worst calamity that could befall me. The reverends were merciless and far crueller in their slave beatings, justifying regular unprovoked beatings as necessary to "whip the devil" from the slaves' souls.

Go where you may, search where you will, roam through all the monarchies and despotisms of the old world, travel through South America, search out every abuse, and when you have found the last, compare your facts with the everyday practices of this nation, and you will say with me, that for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival.

Public opinion slowly turned against slavery as books and newspapers continued to inspire political and social reform; and as new machines were invented for planting, cultivating, and harvesting cotton. When the northern states finally threatened to abolish slavery in the 1850s, the southern states broke away from the north and drew up their own constitution. Southern rebel leaders dreamed of conquering central America and establishing a new white empire powered by black slavery. In the long and bloody civil war that followed, white southerners fought to preserve a leisurely way of life that was only made possible through the use of slave labor.

By the time the southern states were brought back into the federation, more than a million lives had been lost in order to establish once and for all that slavery would never again be tolerated in civilized society. The American constitution was amended to uphold equal rights for all Americans, but these rights would not be properly enforced for another one hundred years.

Capitalism

By the mid 1700s, under the protection of the world's most powerful navy, British ships came to dominate world trade. After building family fortunes through trade with the American colonies, wealthy merchants started to buy up British farmland from the aristocratic families who had managed the land for centuries.

New crops, new fertilizers, and the invention of new mechanical devices for planting and harvesting made the land much more productive. Traditional English farming villages were soon being replaced by large commercial farming operations. The peasant farmers who traditionally worked on the land were forced to leave their homes.

New machines had been invented for spinning and weaving cotton and wool, and many peasant farmers found employment in newly built factories in towns and cities. Originally powered by horses or running water, English factories were soon being powered by steam engines.

Manufacturing became the driving force behind the British economy. Britain became the largest exporter of manufactured goods and London became the financial capital of the world. But all this wealth was concentrated in the hands of a fortunate few at the expense of the vast majority.

A large percentage of the population were factory workers who were paid just enough to make working for a living preferable to dying of starvation. Women and children were often recruited to tend the machines because they could be paid even less.

Most people were forced to work up to sixteen hours a day, six days a week, under oppressive and often dangerous conditions. Attempts by some factory workers to unite in their demands for shorter hours, higher pay, and better working conditions were crushed by the armed forces of the conservative ruling elite.

Many peasants were unable to find work in the mines or factories. Poverty and hunger became so widespread that new laws were introduced to keep the starving multitudes from begging on the streets. Homeless and destitute families were thrown into prisons called workhouses where they were deprived of any rights and forced to work like slaves. Those who resisted were sent to convict settlements overseas. Children who survived the workhouses grew up so abused and undernourished that they rarely lived long.

The wealthy had little sympathy for the misery of the poor. Only members of the Church of England were allowed to hold positions of authority, and the church was directly controlled by merciless and self-indulgent kings who used it to ease the moral conscience of the wealthy by preaching that the poor were suffering as punishment for their sins.

Charity organizations like the Salvation Army had an entirely different understanding of Christianity. Its workers braved the squalid conditions in the overcrowded city slums, comforting the sick, helping troubled children, and promoting cleanliness and sobriety.

The appearance of steam powered printing presses and cheap daily newspapers led to a growing awareness of the scale of the injustice. By the 1830s, widespread rioting and fear of revolution forced the government to extend voting rights to include wealthy businessmen. As a result, parliamentary power shifted from country aristocrats to urban merchants.

Embarrassing reports of young girls being forced to work naked in coal mines, and widespread concern over a complete breakdown of family relationships among the working poor forced the government to introduce new laws to lessen the cruelty and suffering. Girls were banned from working in the mines and limits were placed on the number of hours that children could be forced to work each day.

After decades of intense political struggle, reforms were gradually introduced until by the 1870s, most working men were given the right to vote, child labor was outlawed, and compulsory education was introduced. Labor unions were legalized and workers gained the right to strike for shorter hours and better pay. Higher pay for workers led to a greater demand for consumer goods, and this led to higher business profits, more jobs, and a stronger economy.

By the end of the century, electric power was overtaking steam power and the industrialized world experienced a sustained period of strong economic growth. Along with improvements in city sewerage and health care, the standard of living for most British workers was becoming increasingly tolerable.

The world spirit

By the year 1800, people could see that the world was beginning to undergo a profound transformation. As the German philosopher George Hegel watched Napoleon ride through the streets of his city, he was struck by the impression that he was witnessing the inevitable march towards progress of a collective global consciousness that he called the 'world spirit'.

Hegel wrote that each person contributes to the spirit of their culture and their times, but each person's life is merely a moment in the life of the world spirit. Our entire history can be described as this world spirit progressively emerging into self awareness through the growth of knowledge and the struggle for freedom.

The events of world history are not just senseless acts of greed and violence, rather they are an interconnected series of actions and reactions through which conflicting ideas become resolved. History is progressing according to a determinable logic that leads to the ultimate end of absolute global self awareness, in other words, a world in which everything makes sense.

Hegel said that we are coming from a past full of mistaken ideas, and it is the purpose of science and philosophy to correct these mistaken ideas that prevent us from reaching a greater understanding. Sometimes we can do this best by examining history to show how the old misconceptions came into being.

Hegel tried to trace the path of the world spirit as it moved through history towards the realization of its freedom, but he was barely able to guess its general direction, much less its final resting place. He saw the awakening of the world consciousness as being the emergence into the material plane of existence of the mind of God. He also saw this consciousness being ultimately embodied in the institutions of the state.

Hegel's ideas had a profound influence on modern philosophy. He inspired the German thinker Karl Marx, who also believed that history was progressing according to a determinable logic. But Marx rejected the spiritual aspects of Hegel's philosophy, instead believing the universe to be thoughtless and materialistic.

Communism

The idea of communism had been popular among struggling peasants for centuries before the rise of industry. The thought of overthrowing the local warlord and sharing the land and its resources among

the families who actually worked the land was an appealing dream. Only the threat of armed force and the fear of anarchy made such dreams impossible.

As the industrialization of Europe gained intensity, and as the powerless peasants were being crammed into factories, stripped of their dignity, and forced to work like slaves to an early death, many were dreaming again of revolution.

While working as a radical campaigner for the working poor, Karl Marx developed a convincing theory about politics, economics, and history. He wrote that the history of power and wealth was progressing through stages. Aristocratic power had been replaced by industrial power, and now the peasants were struggling against a new form of slavery. Marx predicted that the long history of social, political, and economic oppression would finally come to an end when the working class rose up and overthrew the ruling class.

Under a communist political system, everyone would be employed by the state and the wealth of the state would be distributed equally among the people. All men and women would have equal rights. The workers would be united and motivated by their belief in material progress. As long as each person contributed to the best of their ability and only asked for as much as they needed, then the continued development of science and technology would gradually lead to an ideal world.

Marx wrote that the ruling class used religion to reinforce its domination over the working class. He said that religion was the “opiate of the masses” used by the ruling class to suppress mass revolution by distracting the workers and molding them into servile conformists. Ironically, communism itself was destined to grow into a godless religion for the poor and oppressed, with Marx as their prophet.

Committed to overthrowing the capitalist system, a growing number of communist revolutionaries preached to the oppressed poor and recruited peasant armies by promising them a better life. Whenever unpopular governments were weakened by wars or other events, Marxist revolutionaries would be there to rally the peasants into overthrowing the ruling class to establish communist states.

The First World War

For centuries, Europe was divided between nations of comparable military strength, each scheming to gain an advantage over the others. Whenever one nation grew too powerful, the other nations would form alliances to balance the threat. Without any common loyalty to unite them, nations with the greatest military strength always tried to dominate and exploit the weaker states.

Germany emerged as the dominant European power after defeating France in 1870. For the next 44 years, Europe remained largely at peace while each nation took advantage of rapidly improving technology to build up its industry, transport, communications, and military forces.

In order for the Europeans to take advantage of their growing potential, they needed to think beyond their national borders and begin organizing their institutions at a more European level. Progressive political thinkers anticipated forming some kind of voluntary union. But democracy had progressed too slowly in Europe, and the egos of hereditary rulers made any steps towards such a union impossible.

Instead, desperately fearing each other's growing power, the European nations armed themselves and made preparations for war. Their rivalry was intensified by the scramble to colonize any unclaimed land in Africa and Asia. The personal ambitions of a handful of predictable aristocrats had become a contest between empires for domination of the world.

A political assassination gave Austria an excuse to invade Serbia, Germany agreed to defend Austria, Russia mobilized to defend Serbia, France allied herself with Russia, and a host of other nations eagerly joined in the fray. Clueless old army generals then ordered millions of unknowing young patriots to be slaughtered by the deadliest array of weaponry that the world had ever seen.

The First World War was a frightful reminder of the darkness under which we had been living. World leaders had been too blinded by their own ambitions to even think about how civilization might safely progress through an age of devastating new technologies. The world was now beginning to learn the price of acting without thinking carefully in a potentially dangerous and unsympathetic universe.

After the war, the president of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, proposed forming a new international organization called the League of Nations, dedicated to promoting world peace. The

people of Europe enthusiastically embraced the idea, but world leaders were not prepared to make any compromises in order to secure peace, and so the new organization was weak and ineffective.

The Russian Revolution

Due to the incompetence of the last Tsar of Russia, Nicholas II, and the inefficiency and corruption of his government, more than a million poorly equipped Russian troops were needlessly wasted in the first year of the war. Mutinies broke out in the army and peasants rebelled in the cities. By 1917, when the Tsar was finally removed from power, the people had lost any confidence in the old ruling class and the communists prepared to take over.

In the revolution that followed, the long oppressed Russian peasants were easily persuaded into handing power over to a handful of charismatic communist revolutionaries. But regardless of their original intentions, over the next few decades, the communist party descended into corruption and inhumanity. Their system of government was transformed into an instrument of terror. Farms and factories became forced labor camps, workers were herded like cattle, and even the borders were closed to prevent escape.

The communists knew that the success of forced equality depended on unquestioning faith in their ideology and absolute loyalty to the state. People were systematically brainwashed by radio and newspaper propaganda. Free thinkers were either 're-educated' or killed. Some communist leaders developed an appetite for murder that made medieval popes look like saints.

Military dictatorships

At the conclusion of the First World War, Europe's borders were redrawn and democratic governments were established across the continent. But in the economic chaos that followed the war, there was widespread hunger and unemployment.

People were dissatisfied with war, poverty, and the other failures and injustices of capitalism. Many were attracted instead to the communist experiment in Russia and its carefully orchestrated illusion of social justice. They were impressed by the rapid modernization of the Russian economy and they became convinced of the virtues of state owned enterprise under a centrally planned economy.

As support for communism continued to grow, wealthy landowners and businessmen across Europe began to fear losing everything in a Russian style revolution. Christianity was already seriously weakened by science and the churches felt desperately threatened by the rising tide of communism. They knew that a successful communist revolution could bring an end to Christianity in Europe.

Over the next twenty years, communist politicians were either elected or nearly elected throughout Europe. But each time the communists looked like gaining power, the democratic political systems were overthrown by conservative coalitions of wealthy landowners, industrialists, church leaders, and army officers. Right wing military dictatorships rose to power all over Europe, sometimes after long and bloody civil wars.

The Great Depression

While Europe was economically ruined by the First World War, America had grown prosperous by lending money and selling weapons and other war supplies to its allies. Now the wealthiest nation in the world, the United States enjoyed rapid industrial growth through the 1920s, spurred on by the construction of city skyscrapers, and by the mass production of cars, trucks, radios, and other consumer goods.

Share prices soared as investors rushed to buy stocks in American companies. But as the number of factories grew and production levels increased, there was not enough demand from consumers to return a profit for investors. Factories were producing more than the market could absorb. The problem was that most Americans were still peasant farmers or underpaid factory workers who were just too poor to afford a house or a car.

In 1929, stock prices collapsed. The fear and uncertainty that followed led to a sharp decrease in spending. As businesses saw their profits falling, workers were dismissed or given pay cuts. With fewer workers and lower incomes, consumer spending continued to drop. The economy spiraled into a

deep depression. Businesses closed and small farmers went bankrupt and lost their land. Growing numbers of unemployed became homeless beggars.

There had been no government regulation of the financial markets, and after the stock market crash, many investment schemes were found to be bogus, having been set up by corporate thieves to fleece unwary investors. Unfortunately, many banks had invested in these schemes, and this led to a collapse in the banking system.

The American government tried to protect its failing domestic industries from foreign competition by imposing heavy import duties on foreign goods. In retaliation, other countries raised their tariffs on imports of American goods. This led to a rapid decline in world trade and the depression continued to deepen around the globe.

In order to create new jobs and stimulate demand, the American government began to spend heavily on projects of national importance like roads, power stations, and communications. A welfare system was established to provide relief for the impoverished. Although these policies helped to reverse the damage and reinvigorate the economy, they were criticized by Wall Street bankers and conservative politicians as being the beginnings of American socialism.

The Nazi party

After losing the First World War, the old German aristocracy was replaced by an unstable democracy. Germany had been forced to pay dearly for its surrender. Severe limits were placed on the size of its army. As a way of getting around these limits, army commanders supported a number of nationalist political parties, each with its own private army that could be called upon as reserves. One of these parties was the Nazi party.

With mesmerizing speeches about building a powerful new Germany, and driven by a vision of his own destiny, Adolf Hitler rose quickly through the ranks of the Nazi party to become its new leader.

The German economy had collapsed after the war. Runaway inflation made the currency almost worthless. Before the economy was able to recover it was hit hard again by the Great Depression, causing the failure of many banks and industries, leaving half of the workforce unemployed, and fueling widespread disillusionment and anger.

German voters grew desperate. The communist party had been enjoying enormous electoral success since the war and was close to winning power. But with the backing of powerful anti-communist businessmen, the Nazi party was able to exploit widespread fear of communism to rise to power instead as the only strong alternative.

With the help of Catholic politicians, Hitler gained dictatorial powers. After destroying his political opponents, he led Germany towards economic recovery by building up its industrial strength through a massive investment in military hardware and advanced weapons technology.

Hitler's racism

Given that Europeans and their overseas colonists were the most technologically advanced people, and European empires ruled over much of the world, many white people saw themselves as the winners of the evolutionary competition for the 'survival of the fittest', and new theories about white supremacy were becoming increasingly popular.

Hitler wrote a book in which his racist ideas reflected the views of many Europeans and Americans. According to Hitler, white Europeans were the creative force behind all civilized culture and technology. The best that other races could do was to copy white ideas. Hitler believed that early civilizations rose when Europeans conquered and enslaved other races, but then when they interbred with these races, civilizations lost their creative vigor and fell into decay.

Hitler understood that it was not enough to have superior technology to win the evolutionary competition, he wanted to use this technology to defeat and eliminate the other races. He planned to conquer the world and complete the process of evolution by selectively breeding his own population and exterminating whoever he considered to be of an inferior race.

For thousands of years, the Jewish people had been inspired by their scriptures to preserve their cultural identity. After being banished from their homeland by the Romans, they spread out and settled around the world, becoming a nation without borders whose interests were best served through peace and trade. But because of their refusal to accept Christianity or Islam, they remained easy targets for cultural and religious intolerance. Over the centuries, they suffered from regular oppressions, expulsions, and occasional exterminations.

Hitler claimed that the Jews were conspiring to take over the world through control of the international banking system. He portrayed them as leeches who fed upon other cultures, and he was committed to either expelling them from Europe or exterminating them. Millions of Jews tried to escape, but very few countries would accept them.

The Second World War

In Hitler's mind, the First World War was unfinished business. He began the Second World War by using superior weapons and strategies to rapidly conquer all of Europe. For the next six years, Hitler reigned supreme over the European mainland. Millions were enslaved by the Nazis and millions more were murdered.

Hitler planned to conquer Russia to plunder its vast natural resources and clear a new living space for the German people. But his invasion was a disaster. The Nazis were eventually crushed, Hitler committed suicide, and a defeated Germany was divided between the communist east and the capitalist west.

Ironically, Hitler's legacy was to help dispel the myths about racism and to discourage future wars of conquest. The war was so well documented that it will forever remain a lesson embedded in world culture. Any world leader who now demonstrates unhealthy ambitions will be compared to Adolf Hitler.

History and experience have proven that no individual can be considered inferior because of the color of their skin. The differing wealth of nations is due more to historical fortune, cultural baggage, and the quality of governance than anything else. And Hitler was wrong about interbreeding, which throughout evolutionary history has allowed the common strengths of each race to be combined for the benefit of future generations.

People who consider themselves to be superior should be able to prove it by successfully raising their families in a free and peaceful world full of equal opportunities, rather than for races to be exterminated or for nations to be destroyed by war. In any case, Hitler proved that civilizations fall into decay when they are dragged into senseless wars by insane dictators.

Japan had astonished the world by transforming from an agricultural economy into an industrial and military superpower within the space of a few decades. Convinced of their own superiority, the Japanese military dictatorship embarked upon an aggressive campaign of territorial expansion to build a new Asian empire.

After the Japanese invaded China, and after they signed a pact with the Nazis, America ceased all trade with Japan. The Japanese entered the war by launching a devastating surprise attack on the American naval fleet. The Americans ended the war by dropping two atomic bombs on Japan.

After the war, representatives from 50 nations held a conference to discuss the formation of a new international organization called the United Nations with the aim of promoting world peace and human rights.

The United Nations officially came into existence in 1945 after its charter had been agreed to and signed by the member states. In the preamble of the charter, it is written ...

We the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom, and for these ends to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbors,

and to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest, and to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples, have resolved to combine our efforts to accomplish these aims.

The Cold War

The enslavement and extermination of native people by European colonists continued until well into the 1900s. Some white leaders claimed to be conquering the 'inferior breeds' in the interests of higher civilization, meanwhile they plundered as much of the world's resources as they could. Colored people everywhere were denied legal rights and were not even recognized as human beings on their own land.

After the Second World War, the European nations returned to reclaim their slave colonies in Africa and Asia. The French government for example, after having been liberated from German occupation, arrogantly returned to reoccupy Vietnam. But now the Europeans faced fierce resistance from Asian independence fighters armed with weapons left behind by the Japanese.

Although Europe had been liberated from the Germans, eastern Europe was now occupied by Russian forces who were busy establishing communist dictatorships loyal to Russia. The Russians claimed to be driven by ideology, but the Russian dictatorship was really only using communism as an excuse for its own territorial expansion. Popular uprisings against communist party dictatorships in Hungary and Czechoslovakia were crushed by Russian tanks. Half of Europe's population became imprisoned behind an iron curtain of secrecy and fear.

Some of the scientists working on the atomic bomb projects in England and the United States were communist sympathizers who handed nuclear secrets over to the Russians. Now armed with nuclear weapons and committed to the aggressive expansion of communism, the Russians posed a menacing threat to democracy and freedom.

Revolutionaries backed by Russia fought to establish communist states throughout Asia. Meanwhile the Western democracies, fearing the rapid spread of communism and wishing to entrench their own influence in the region, supported rebels fighting to establish right wing military dictatorships loyal to the West. Many Asian states erupted into civil war.

A war that began with the Vietnamese fighting for freedom against the French slowly escalated into an international battleground as Western forces fought to resist the further expansion of communism. More bombs were dropped on Asian peasants during this war than were dropped on Europeans throughout the whole of the Second World War.

The communist threat to world democracy now seemed so serious that no price was too high to prevent it from spreading, short of global nuclear war. Western intelligence agencies conspired to overthrow emerging democracies throughout the developing world whenever they feared the election of communists. They assassinated elected politicians, supported right wing military coups, and supplied arms to ruthless military dictators employing death squads.

The civil rights movement

With the end of European colonization, the long oppressed colored people in the United States and other European colonies sensed a new climate of social change. When peaceful demonstrations failed to convince white voters of the unbearable conditions they were being forced to live under, some groups turned instead to violent protests. After centuries of struggle and despair, gaining the right to vote would be the turning point in their fight for equal rights and opportunities.

Martin Luther King was a Baptist church minister who led a peaceful campaign for black civil rights in America. He received the Nobel peace prize for his efforts, and he continued to organize peaceful protests and give memorable speeches until being assassinated in 1968. His speeches are still relevant today ...

In the human rights revolution, if something is not done, and in a hurry, to bring the colored peoples of the world out of their long years of poverty, their long years of hurt and neglect, then the whole world is doomed.

I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I refuse to accept the cynical notion that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into the hell of nuclear destruction. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality.

I have the audacity to believe that people everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds; and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits.

The collapse of communism

Communism offered little incentive to improve economic efficiency or develop new technology. Companies in capitalist countries competed to exploit every possible technological advantage, but state owned factories in communist countries could only try to copy capitalist innovations.

After capitalist countries developed advanced electronics and affordable desktop computers, the communist economies fell behind and collapsed. With inefficient factories producing nothing of any value on the world market, the people of Russia and Eastern Europe, whose hopes had been crushed for so long, were left poverty stricken and ideologically exhausted.

History had proven Marx to be wrong about many things, especially about economic progress and human nature. Communism was like a religion, imposing its moral order by preaching myths about history and dreams about some kind of slave utopia. The communist party turned out to be nothing more than another corrupt priesthood, forcing its failed theories upon others, dedicated only to the pursuit of its own power.

The Chinese adapted to the failure of communism by abandoning their socialist ideals and embracing capitalism instead. Without any legitimate reason to resist democratic reforms, the Chinese government now appears to be just another oppressive capitalist dictatorship, riddled with corruption and mismanagement, holding back the progress of its own people, and potentially threatening the safety of the world as it strives to fulfill some nostalgic dream of regaining its glorious past.

The Middle East

By the end of the 1800s, the British had defeated the Muslims in India, the French and British had invaded North Africa, and much of Central Asia was occupied by Russian troops. What remained of the Islamic Empire was on the verge of disintegration. However, the Europeans helped to prop it up as a defense against any further territorial expansion by Russia.

As Islamic civilization was being overtaken by its European rival, many Muslims began to suffer a profound religious crisis. Some intellectuals complained that the Islamic world needed to adapt to modern political ideas like nationalism, democracy, higher education, and even equality for women. They argued that it was possible to live in a modern society and still be a good Muslim as long as modern ideas were contemplated in the light of Islam.

Many Muslim clerics, however, were opposed to modernization. They believed that the only solution was to return to a strict interpretation of the Koran under strict Islamic law. Because of this, many intellectuals came to regard the religious establishment as the greatest obstacle to progress. It seemed like Islamic values would continue to stifle the kind of innovative thinking that was necessary for success in the modern world.

When the First World War broke out, the Turks allied themselves with the Germans. In response to this, the British convinced Arab leaders to rebel against the Turks by promising to help them establish a new Arab empire. Meanwhile, Britain conspired with France to divide the empire up into colonies.

After the war, Syria and Lebanon became French dominions while Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, and Iran came under British influence.

Shortly after the war, a Turkish military commander known as Ataturk expelled all foreign forces from Turkey and established an aggressively secular nationalist dictatorship. His government embarked on an ambitious plan to modernize Turkish society by removing Islamic influences from the law. Alcohol was legalized, women were no longer forced to wear veils, and religion became a private matter for each citizen.

Other governments in the region followed Turkey's lead by implementing similar reforms. They wanted to liberalize their societies and modernize their economies by imitating the West.

As the old Islamic Empire came to an end, an Arab leader named Abdul Aziz Al-Saud led an army of religiously inspired warriors to conquer Mecca and establish a new Arab kingdom called Saudi Arabia. As the new ruler of the birthplace of Islam, Al-Saud's power depended heavily on the support of the religious establishment, who felt comfortably reassured by his commitment to strict Islamic laws and values.

The rise of political Islam

After oil was discovered in the Middle East, Western oil companies became very influential in regional politics. When huge oil reserves were discovered in Saudi Arabia, the United States government formed an alliance with the Saudi royal family, agreeing to defend their kingdom against any threat in order to guarantee a reliable supply of cheap oil.

After the Second World War, with the end of European colonialism, most of the countries in the Middle East gained their independence. However, they still remained under the authoritarian rule of kings and dictators, most of whom had risen to power with the help of the Europeans.

As the Cold War intensified, while some regional dictators were able to hold on to power, others were toppled by popular uprisings or military coups, usually backed by either Russia or the United States, who were only concerned about their own strategic oil interests without much regard for the needs of the local people.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, the religious establishment played no significant role in Middle Eastern politics. Although many people still prayed in their local mosques, religion was considered to be a private matter. Even in Pakistan, which was established as a Muslim state after the partition of India in 1947, religion did not play a major role in politics.

Oil wealth is much easier to monopolize than industrial wealth, and while most oil rich kings and dictators and their friends and families acquired massive fortunes and lived in luxury, other sectors of their economies were left undeveloped. Economic mismanagement and a complete lack of financial accountability helped to condemn the growing population of the region to high unemployment and widespread poverty.

The regional media was heavily censored, and dissent was silenced with brutal repression. Mosques became one of the few remaining venues for political discussion. Although many clerics were arrested or killed, closing the mosques seemed too extreme for even the dictators to contemplate.

The Western political establishment was opposed to democracy in the region, fearing they might lose their strategic oil allies. For democracy activists who were struggling to establish political freedom in their countries, this was just another classic example of Western imperialist hypocrisy.

Over the decades, radical Islam came to be seen by many as the only viable political opposition force: devoted to God and claiming to be incorruptible, bitterly opposed to both communism and Western imperialism, well funded by the religious establishment, and actively concerned about the welfare of even the poorest sections of the community.

The Islamic Revolution

The Shah of Iran was a pro-western dictator installed by the British and propped up by the Americans. He was committed to modernizing Iranian society through education, industrialization, and equal rights for women. Under his rule, Iran became the richest, most developed, and most heavily armed

state in the region, regarded by the United States as one of its closest allies, and seen by the West as a buffer against communism and a reliable source for cheap oil.

However, the shah treated his country's wealth like it was his own personal fortune, enriching his friends and wasting billions on extravagances. As opposition to his rule grew more vocal over the decades, particularly from the religious establishment, the shah became increasingly brutal in his repression. His secret police imprisoned, tortured, and killed thousands of suspected political opponents, and many, like the Ayatollah Khomeini, were forced to flee the country.

Tensions rose steadily over the decades until in 1978, a series of events led to protests which rapidly escalated into mass demonstrations. Secular academics, Marxist revolutionaries, and Muslim clerics protested with one voice while wealthy merchants marched alongside the dispossessed poor. Although their aims and interests were different, they temporarily joined forces for the common cause of removing the hated shah.

Widespread strikes crippled the economy. Mass demonstrations were broken up by soldiers firing into crowds. Hundreds of protestors were killed every day. The violence continued to escalate until millions of people took to the streets, crippling the army's ability to repress them. The army disintegrated as soldiers mutinied and joined the protestors. With the entire population now against him, the shah fled to America.

In the intense political upheaval that followed, while moderates were drafting a new democratic constitution, Muslim clerics took control of the law courts, religious fanatics attacked communists and academics, and the Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile to declare himself the 'supreme leader for life' of an Islamic republic.

Strict Islamic law was introduced, women were forced to wear veils, and prostitutes and homosexuals were executed as the ayatollah began his own reign of terror. America was declared to be the enemy of Islam, the staff of the American embassy were taken hostage, and angry mobs of religious fanatics marched through the streets chanting "death to America".

Other Islamic extremists looked to Iran as an example and an inspiration. The most powerful Western ally in the region had fallen and been replaced by an Islamic republic. Fearing that the revolution might spread, regional dictators began yielding to the demands of Muslim radicals by distancing themselves from the West and Islamizing many of their laws.

Regional hostility towards America was initially fuelled by anti-imperialist sentiment, religious intolerance, Cold War communist propaganda, America's cosy relationships with corrupt dictators, its opposition to democracy in the region, its unconditional support for the restoration of biblical Israel, and Islamic fundamentalist revulsion towards many aspects of popular American culture. When you add to this a series of failed American military interventions and an ongoing military presence in the region, then it is not surprising that even the most hated dictators have been able to improve their popularity by deflecting public anger towards America and Israel.

Power always corrupts

After the Second World War, the United States government assumed the role of being a kind of 'global policeman', using its formidable military and economic power to oppose the enemies of democracy and capitalism. But just like every other nation in history, despite any claims to higher ideals, the American government acts primarily in its own national interest.

Opportunity leads to temptation, and unrestrained power sets its own agenda. Although most Americans would like to believe that their government always tries to do what is morally right, there have been plenty of occasions in recent history when the United States government has acted like a corrupt policeman, using the threat of military force to extort political and economic concessions from other nations.

Just like in England, France, Russia and every other powerful nation, there is an elite political establishment in America that will take advantage of any opportunity to increase its own global dominance by spoiling the possibility of political and economic progress in other less developed nations. They preach freedom and democracy while undermining elected governments and supporting brutal dictatorships whenever it serves their interests.

Although American politicians regularly condemn other nations for violating human rights, there are powerful forces in American politics who believe that the United States should use its overwhelming military power to impose 'American rights', such as the right to ignore international laws and conventions.

Some powerful political forces are even outspoken opponents of human rights. They are committed instead to pure capitalism, unburdened by concern for human values. They believe that economic progress is not compatible with social responsibility. They value American corporate and military interests over the lives of innocent civilians. They profit by elevating world conflict while plunging their nation deep into debt by pouring billions of dollars into weapons manufacturers and military contracting companies owned by family connections.

Democracy

Democratic politics is almost entirely driven by greed and self-interest. Each election is like a selfish grab for power. Political parties do whatever they can within the law and sometimes outside of the law to gain extra votes. People vote for the party that will tax them less, spend more on their personal interests, and bias the laws in their favor. Few politicians survive by championing higher ideals.

The reason why democracy has succeeded over every other form of government is because people have a peaceful way of removing leaders they no longer want. After being in government for too long, even honest politicians often become corrupted by power or stained by controversy.

Freedom of speech is the foundation of democracy. Governments are held accountable by free speech, every decision must have a reason, every cent must be accountable, bad decisions are punished at election time. The free flow of information allows both people and governments to make the best informed decisions.

Without freedom of speech, corrupt politicians, corporate monopolies, religious fanatics, military elites, and other powerful interest groups will do whatever they can to restrict the flow of information and distort the truth in order to manipulate the minds of the masses and increase their power and wealth.

Dictatorships have little incentive to reform ineffective laws. But under democracy, competing political parties need to be seen to be constantly acting in the best interests of voters. And so the laws are continually refined through a process of community consultation and public debate.

Public protest against oppression can sometimes be the only way to force political change. Without the democratic right to protest peacefully, people often have no other option than to act violently, which usually only brings greater oppression in its wake.

The United States government is not the best example of a fair democratic system. It is like a two party dictatorship in which minority views have no direct representation. Environmentalists are forced into partnership with radical socialists, and moral crusaders are forced to join forces with corporate polluters.

This problem could be solved by using proportional voting to allocate national senate seats, like in other countries, rather than the existing system, in which voters from smaller states have much more of a say in government than voters from larger states do. Proportional voting would allow smaller parties representing minority interests to be elected to the senate. Disgruntled voters might be more interested in voting if the choices they have are meaningful.

In any case, American government policy is largely directed by bribes from corporate lobbyists. Some say that it is in the nation's best economic interests to sell the decision-making process to the highest bidder, even when those who can buy the greatest influence are often those who profit most from military adventurism, and those who monopolize and overcharge for essential services.

However, democratic reforms must be undertaken very carefully. History has shown that any attempt to reform a working democracy invites the danger of being manipulated by powerful elites seeking more power for themselves. Democracies must always balance the need for reform against the risk of undertaking it.

Rising religious tensions

While the vast majority of Christians today are kind, generous, peace loving people who are committed to social justice, there are also a large number of Christians who have been brainwashed into believing that every word of the Bible is true, and so they reject scientific explanations, they oppose freedom of speech, and they want to outlaw divorce, abortion, and homosexuality, because that is what the Bible suggests.

If only these delusional fanatics could see that the original intention of the authors of their religion was to encourage people to abandon greed, hatred, and perversion, so that they might make their own enlightened moral judgments based upon honesty, equality, and compassion rather than following the often barbaric moral dictates of ancient religious scriptures.

The overwhelming majority of Muslims today ignore the violent teachings in the Koran by putting them into historical context, just like most Jews put the violent teachings of their holy scriptures into historical context. But there are also many Muslims who have been brainwashed into believing that the Koran is the final word of God, and so they oppose democracy and freedom of speech because they fear that modern democratic values will eventually replace conservative Islamic ones.

There was a time when religious extremism was tolerated because it did not pose too much of a danger to the continuation of civilization. But now the peace and prosperity of the world is being seriously threatened by extremists who believe in using violence to promote and defend Islam. Whenever Muslim lands are occupied by non-Muslims, or whenever there is a chance of gaining new lands for Islam, then the extremists will be there to take advantage of the situation by preaching holy war.

Some extremist leaders even dream of rebuilding the old Islamic empire. By launching successful terrorist attacks against the perceived enemies of Islam, they hope to rally enough believers to help them overthrow the unpopular dictatorships now governing many Muslim countries. Once they have taken possession of the region's oil wealth, and once they are protected by an arsenal of nuclear weapons, they plan to use every resource at their disposal to continue the aggressive spread of Islam.

They dream of a world purified by Islam and dedicated entirely to the worship of God. For them, disbelief is the main cause of evil, and democracy breeds disbelief by encouraging people to satisfy their own interests instead of living to serve the will of God. They believe that secular forms of government are a violation of God's sovereignty over the earth, therefore all nations must submit themselves to the rule of Islamic theocracy.

The communists in China and North Korea are now selling cheap long-range missiles, and Islamic dictatorships are sharing nuclear secrets. And the chances are very high that these weapons will eventually fall into the hands of Islamic extremists who will use them without any warning against whoever they consider to be the enemies of Islam. For these reasons, the United States has reaffirmed its intention to remain the unchallengeable global military superpower.

The United States military is now developing an advanced weapons system which uses satellites and other sources of information to generate a computerized map of the entire surface of the earth, which includes every house and building, and details about the people who live and work in each place. Using this system, they will be able to rapidly destroy any target in the world using pilotless aircraft carrying precision guided bombs and missiles.

In order to preserve their cherished way of life, the only solution that some American politicians can think of is to create a military monstrosity that is powerful enough to threaten the remaining dictatorships into submission, and if necessary, to introduce them to democracy through war. They hope that democracy will give the vast majority of moderate Muslims the power to restrain their extremist brothers.

However, the use of military force only seems to further radicalize some Muslims who have nothing left to lose and who have no fear of death. Their sense of outrage is further inflamed by what they perceive to be a continuation of Christian and Jewish imperialism, and by the transparent hypocrisy of Western rhetoric about freedom and human rights while much of the world's population continues to suffer deprivation in the sight of unsympathetic Western eyes.

Frustrated by poverty and unemployment, and being otherwise powerless to improve their living conditions, they see this world as merely a place to prepare themselves for a better life in the world to come. They are attracted to Muslim extremists who preach that the most effective way for them to express their anger and preserve all that they know and love is through holy war against the infidels.

Education is the answer

There are now hundreds of millions of children living in poor countries, or in countries whose governments spend more money on weapons than on schools, and where most parents cannot afford to pay for a private education. The only hope these parents have, is for their children to attend free classes held in religious schools run by fundamentalist clerics, usually with funding from oil rich Islamic states, where the first thing they learn is to memorize the Koran in Arabic.

The most frustrating thing about this situation is that for only a fraction of the cost of developing superweapons, children around the world could all be given the kind of education that would lead to an understanding of science and evolution. Only an education in evolution can liberate and immunize a child's mind from the dark delusions of religious extremism.

Without knowledge of evolution, people can only ever see themselves as players in some kind of imaginary drama. Barely able to keep a grip on reality, they will be confused by the events in their own lives and unable to comprehend the events that are shaping the world around them. Only an education in evolution can give people a proper understanding of who they are, where they come from, and where they are going.

Unfortunately, the teaching of evolution will continue to face resistance as long as atheist academics continue to argue that evolution is not compatible with a belief in God. The tiresome debate between Christian creationists and evolutionary atheists has continued to distort Western thinking now for more than a century. Until this issue has been resolved, the Western powers will be in no position to lecture other nations on matters of science, philosophy, or religion.

Perhaps the traditional religions ultimately need to be replaced rather than reformed. Religions like Christianity and Islam can never really be modernized, because the words of the Bible and Koran can never be changed. These books will forever remain an anchor for fundamentalism, and liberal interpretations will almost invariably drift towards relativism until they become ineffectual, leading to periodic resurgences of fundamentalism.

In any case, nuclear terrorism will continue to be a threat as long as there are oppressive dictatorships in the world. Democracy has long proven to be the only possible path to peace and prosperity. The popular will of millions of people has much more power to make wise decisions than the selfish ambitions of a handful of greedy politicians, priests, and generals.

Only with the further spread of democracy and freedom of speech will the despondent masses living in undeveloped countries be free to prosper and lead satisfying lives.

The United Nations

For almost 50 years, while democracy struggled against communism, the United Nations worked successfully as a forum for diplomacy, preventing global nuclear war by allowing each side to argue its case before the judgment of the international community.

However, the voting power of the communist dictatorships prevented the United Nations from making any real progress on human rights. And the decisions of the United Nations will continue to be questionable as long as the opinions of a handful of grotesque dictators carry more weight than the aspirations for freedom of the hundreds of millions of people they oppress.

Decisions made by the United Nations are not only distorted by dictators whose interests are the opposite of their people, but also by powerful nations scheming to increase their own global dominance. In the game of international diplomacy, the governments of some powerful nations seem to regard international law as an annoyance unless it can be used to advantage against an enemy.

The United Nations cannot become the leading force in world politics until the entire world has finally embraced democracy. Even then, its decisions will remain questionable as long as they only reflect

the selfish interests of narrowly elected governments, and as long as the power of each person's opinion is unevenly distributed across the globe.

Only by including an additional assembly of elected representatives will the United Nations ever gain unquestionable legitimacy. Such an assembly would need to be directly elected by the people using a global proportional voting system rather than for regional representatives to be elected by majority vote. A global proportional voting system would help to ease political divisions, by allowing minority groups to gain representation, and by encouraging people to vote for global rather than regional issues.

It would be a grave mistake for any nation to surrender sovereign power to an institution that is not democratic. It is not inconceivable that the governance of the United Nations or its subsidiary institutions like the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, or the World Court might one day be taken over by self-serving political elitists. Continued democratic reform of the United Nations is now essential to the progress of world peace.

Shattering the Sacred Myths - Chapter 12

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Sexual Morality

Looks at sexual morality from an evolutionary point of view and condemns the traditional religions for their positions on women's rights and birth control.

For as long as our ancestors have walked upon the earth, they have struggled to survive against the forces of nature. Burned by the sun, drenched by the rain, and frozen by the ice and snow, they were driven by hunger to fight for whatever they could find to eat. Attacked by enemies and afflicted by diseases, the strong survived while the weak were worn down, and the slow and ill-fated perished.

They lived to enjoy a few simple pleasures. The taste of a good meal on an empty stomach, a warm place to sleep on a cold night, a caring embrace, perhaps a tender moment of love, and then the fulfillment of conceiving a new life. They were innocently led by the mysteries of nature to add another link to the unbroken chain of generations, before the decay of old age, the onset of disease, and then death.

Sexual reproduction

Most people consider it to be their purpose in life to find a partner and raise a family. Men, women, and the traditional family structure have all evolved for the creation, protection, and education of new generations. But there is a cold reality behind the warmth of love. Sexual reproduction is about increasing the rate of evolution, not about increasing the size of the population.

The reason why humankind is divided into males and females is because sexual reproduction allows the beneficial mutations from separate ancestries to be combined in the DNA of a few fortunate children. Sexual desire is usually what brings couples together, romantic feelings keep them interested for a time, and then the bond that grows through familiarity may keep them together for life.

Evolution favors any mutation that increases the drive to find sex partners. As a result, our reproductive organs have evolved sensitive nerves that stimulate powerful pleasure centers in our brains. Sounds, smells, and visual cues arouse the sexual instinct, and then the anticipation of sexual pleasure draws couples together, sometimes resulting in a man's sperm fertilizing a woman's egg, which in the natural world, inevitably leads to children.

Pregnant women are vulnerable, their health is at risk, and they need more food and care. Although most women gain pleasure from sex, they are also compelled to consider their future and the future of any children they give birth to. Raising children alone can be an enormous burden for a single

mother, and without the support of family members or government assistance, the children of a single parent can be seriously disadvantaged.

While most men are likely to pursue sex for pleasure, most women are torn between their own desires, the desires of men, and the expectations of their family and culture. From adolescence onwards, much of our thought and behavior develops in response to the tangled web of sexual instincts and related issues.

Traditional morality

The human brain is just a mass of nerve cells stimulated by sight, sound, touch, and other sensations carried in from around the body. The brain adapts to these sensations however it can, but the needs of an organized society must often force restraints upon our natural responses. Sexual reproduction adds complication and occasional conflict to the delicate balance between individual desires and community needs.

There are no perfect rules for sexual behavior, but the conservative elements of society often try to enforce traditional rules and understandings. Sometimes when these rules are based upon mistaken ideas, they generate more problems than they solve.

Since prehistoric times, restraint of the sexual instinct has been one of the primary responsibilities of religion. Females were generally forbidden from having sex until a public commitment was made by the male to stay with the female and raise the children. Marriage rituals and laws against adultery reduced the transmission of sexual diseases and provided a stable family environment for the raising of new generations. In some cultures, divorce was forbidden and adultery was punishable by death.

Population growth

Around ten thousand years ago, the population of the entire world was around ten million people. This was the maximum number of people that could be fed by hunting wild animals and gathering plants. The population increased when the climate improved and the land became more fertile. When the climate worsened and the land became less fertile, children starved and the competition for territory usually led to tribal war.

Food became abundant and populations grew as the knowledge of farming spread. By the time of the Roman Empire, the population of the world had multiplied to over one hundred million people. The rich and powerful lived in luxury, but the vast majority of people were peasant farmers who were lucky to be left with enough food to survive. Most of the fertile land was occupied, and there were few opportunities for employment in the towns and cities.

Starvation, disease, and war prevented further population growth. Although grain storage helped to overcome crop failure, any long term problem with the harvest usually led to social disintegration and migration. Diseases were common in densely populated areas. Most families were fortunate to have two or more children survive long enough to breed. Gradual improvements in farming techniques allowed the population to rise to around 500 million by the year 1500.

Food production has increased dramatically over the last few centuries with dam water irrigation, motorized farm machinery, railway transport for fertilizer and farm produce, and food preservation. The population reached around one billion in 1830. By 1930, it had doubled to two billion, and by 1975, it had doubled again to four billion. The growing populations of industrialized nations found employment in factories and businesses, while the undeveloped nations continued to suffer unemployment, poverty, war, and starvation.

Women's rights

Aristotle declared that an unborn baby was not alive until the woman could feel the first movement in her womb. Saint Augustine wrote that an unborn baby has no soul for the first 40 days of pregnancy for a boy and 80 days for a girl. Such opinions were written into church law and reinforced by a succession of popes, and for more than 1500 years, the Catholic Church did not consider abortion to be a serious sin, and society did not consider it to be a moral problem.

Abortion within the first few months of pregnancy was legal and acceptable in Europe and America until the 1800s. As growing numbers of people moved to the cities to work in factories and businesses, their outlook on life became increasingly materialistic. Couples wanted smaller families and religious morality was losing its influence. Abortion grew to become a popular form of birth control. This led the medical profession to become increasingly concerned about unsafe practices, and they pushed to have abortion outlawed, first in England and then later in the United States.

Reliable condoms and other birth control devices became available around the mid 1800s. The idea of 'voluntary motherhood' became popular and birth rates in industrialized nations began to fall. Some women believed that reliable birth control would finally give them the opportunity to participate more actively in society, rather than being tied down to the traditional roles of keeping the house and raising the children.

Women's groups began to demand the same rights as men. They wanted the right to earn money, the right to own property, and they wanted access to education. But in the eyes of the law, women were merely the property of their husbands, slaves to their husband's needs and desires. Women in democratic countries soon realized that in order to achieve equal rights, they must first win the right to vote.

The most vocal opponents of women's rights in Europe and America were the Christian churches, whose misconceptions about male superiority came from both church tradition and from the Bible. In America, church leaders were joined by conservative politicians, who were concerned that birth control was an expense that could only be afforded by wealthy white women. They feared that if wealthy white American families had fewer children then they would eventually lose their dominance and be overrun by large families of poor immigrants and colored people.

Conservative political and religious forces spearheaded a cultural backlash against the women's rights movement by provoking widespread fear about women deserting their traditional roles as wives and mothers. They argued that it was selfish for women to avoid their maternal duties by using birth control.

In 1869, the Catholic Church condemned abortion as an immoral act. In 1873, a law was passed in the United States that not only banned the sale of birth control devices, but also prohibited the distribution of any information about birth control techniques. Speaking about birth control in public or even writing about it in a letter could get you thrown into jail.

Meanwhile, women in England continued to demand the right to vote in the face of fierce resistance from conservative politicians. Public demonstrations were broken up by police. Protest organizers were arrested, and many women continued their protests in jail by going on hunger strike. Some protesters were so outraged by the attitude of conservative Christians that they began setting fire to churches.

Australia and New Zealand were the first democratic countries in the world to give women the right to vote. Women were finally given the right to vote in England and the United States in the aftermath of the horrors of the First World War. French women were forced to wait until after the Second World War.

Margaret Sanger

Margaret Sanger was a nurse who worked with poor women in New York City in the early 1900s. She was appalled by the poverty and suffering caused by unwanted pregnancies. After seeing one woman die from a horrific attempt to give herself an abortion, she gave up nursing to dedicate herself to fighting for the legalization of birth control.

She began by writing pamphlets about women's rights, and in 1914, she fled the country after being charged with distributing illegal information about birth control. She spent a year in Europe researching birth control techniques and then returned to the United States after her case was dismissed.

She later opened a clinic in New York to offer advice about birth control to married women, but the clinic was soon shut down by police and she was arrested. The case attracted nationwide publicity,

and after winning her court appeal, the interpretation of the law was changed to allow doctors to advise married women about birth control.

Over the next few decades, Sanger helped to establish national and international organizations to fight for the availability of birth control devices. The Catholic Church was her fiercest opponent. She continued to be hounded by religious fanatics and was jailed several more times until birth control was finally legalized in the United States in 1936.

She later helped to organize funding for research into new birth control methods. The fruit of her efforts was the birth control pill, which became publicly available in the 1960s. Along with the cultural changes that followed the invention of the television, the birth control pill helped to bring about a revolution in sexual behavior.

The Sexual Revolution

Before the 1960s, the social pressure against unwed motherhood was so strong that few unmarried women were willing to have sex unless they believed that the man would marry them if they became pregnant. These days, the widespread availability of birth control has led to dramatic changes in attitudes towards sex and marriage. Having finally broken the connection between sex and pregnancy, many women now feel free to pursue the same desires and enjoy the same opportunities as men.

Birth control allows women to delay childbearing until they are older, more experienced, better educated, and more financially secure. Not only can educated women contribute more to the economy, but more experienced mothers are better able to raise more capable children. Women who are financially independent can more easily demand the same rights and opportunities as men. After years of struggle against male domination, women in most industrialized democracies have achieved equal status to men in the eyes of the law.

Now that the sexual morality of traditional religion is widely rejected, it is common for people to have more than one sexual relationship before they choose to have children. Couples often live together for years before they marry. Some men and women avoid lasting relationships as long as they can continue to attract desirable partners. The result of liberated sexual behavior has been a decline in the population of modern industrialized nations. It is only because of immigration from poor countries that the populations of some industrialized nations continue to rise.

Freedom vs oppression

While acknowledging that irresponsible sexual behavior should never be encouraged, when modern sexual freedom is compared to the cruelty and inhumanity of traditional sexual oppression, freedom definitely seems to be the better option.

Outlawing sex before marriage forced young people to rush into unsuitable partnerships. Outlawing birth control and abortion drove women to risk death in backyard abortion clinics. Outlawing divorce promoted violence against women and children. When divorce was made more easily available, married couples who had not seen each other for years were finally free to marry new partners. Outlawing homosexuality only led to the widespread blackmailing and imprisonment of otherwise innocent men and women.

The old way of thinking was that strict censorship was necessary in order to maintain high moral standards. With the invention of color photography, there was widespread concern about the effect that the spread of pornography would have on society. Surprisingly, the legalization of pornography led to a massive decrease in violent sexual crimes against women. It appears that pornography, like prostitution, can play a useful role in society by helping to relieve unfulfilled desires.

Population control

Our traditional religions have been continuing their ancient duty to repress the sexual instinct. They mistakenly believe that they can force people to abstain from enjoying the pleasure of sex by preventing access to birth control. But as the world's population becomes unsustainable, and uncontrolled population growth condemns many developing nations to poverty, the influence of traditional religion has become a serious problem.

Without birth control, the growing populations of poor countries are only limited by starvation, disease, and war. Most women in poor countries want access to birth control, but because of poverty and the interference of religious organizations, they cannot gain access to it. Faced with the demand for sex from their husbands, they continue to give birth, only to watch helplessly as their babies starve. The surviving children grow up without access to education and with little or no hope of employment.

While most people in industrialized nations can easily afford the cost of birth control, it remains beyond the reach of those who need it most. Only when birth control is provided for free to women in developing nations will the cycle of poverty, starvation, disease, and war be broken. Free birth control would allow every couple to choose how many children they want to have. The global cost of providing free birth control would be small compared to the long term financial, environmental, and human costs if nothing is done.

Religious morality

The Catholic Church remains the most powerful opponent of birth control. Through political influence in Catholic countries and in the United Nations, they have succeeded in slowing down by decades the worldwide acceptance and availability of birth control. They have been a leading contributor to overpopulation, third world poverty, and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.

The Catholic Church has continued to campaign against the use of condoms, even in places like Africa, where the deadly AIDS virus is taking an immense toll on human life and health. Church leaders are so fanatical about restricting the rights of women that they have even fought to prevent rape victims from receiving the 'morning after' pill or safe abortions.

Albert Einstein once said ...

I am convinced that some political and social activities and practices of the Catholic organizations are detrimental and even dangerous for the community as a whole, here and everywhere. I mention here only the fight against birth control at a time when overpopulation in various countries has become a serious threat to the health of people and a grave obstacle to any attempt to organize peace on this planet.

Some Islamic authorities also oppose the availability of birth control, but women living under Islam face much more serious problems. Women in some Muslim countries are denied access to education and are not permitted to work outside the family home. Girls cannot marry without the permission of a father or brother, and young girls are sometimes forced into arranged marriages with much older men.

Islam teaches that eliminating temptation is more effective than trying to resist it. Men and women who are not married are forbidden to interact with one another or be alone together. Women are not permitted to walk in the street unless accompanied by a close male relative. If seen with a man who is not a close relative, a woman can be arrested and examined to see if she has recently had sex. Under strict Islamic law, sex outside of marriage is punishable by death. Even rape victims are commonly jailed for adultery.

Islamic authorities believe that they can suppress the sexual cravings of men by forcing women to wear clothing that hides their physical beauty. In some Muslim countries, women cover their faces with veils; in others, women are forced to cover themselves from head to toe with full length body bags. Films showing women without suitable covering are banned. Women who do not conform to oppressive Islamic moral dictates are often brutally attacked or killed.

The traditional religions have long lost any intellectual credibility or moral authority and can no longer be trusted to provide appropriate guidelines for sexual behavior. Religious fundamentalists do not believe in evolution, and so their ideas about sexual reproduction are about as far removed from reality as any ideas can possibly be. They do not believe that sexual morality should be allowed to change in response to changing birth control technology.

Restricting the rights of women now has less to do with sexual morality and more to do with religious leaders scheming to increase the following of their particular religious sect by manipulating their believers into outbreeding the followers of other beliefs.

Traditional religious organizations operate like businesses that compete to exploit people's need for belonging and their anxiety about the unknown. They profit from our sentiment for ancient words of wisdom and they capitalize on our cultural investment in ancient myths and rituals.

Religious leaders sometimes think and act like ruthless businessmen who will seek any opportunity to increase their market share. In violent times, they often resort to violence, and in peacetime, they often use threats of damnation and other forms of coercion and bullying.

As the head of a thriving transnational corporation which earns countless billions of dollars each year and employs millions of people worldwide, just like any other business executive, the pope's highest priority is the success of his church, not the welfare of humankind, and unless the church changes its policies on birth control, then these two objectives are not compatible.

While most religious leaders express strong opinions on issues associated with sexual morality like marriage, homosexuality, and abortion, they rarely ever speak out about real moral issues like racism, dictatorship, or war. If anything, traditional religion is often used to justify these rather than to oppose them.

Democratic balance

Abortion pills are now available in some countries. And although abortion can be much safer than childbirth, even safe methods of abortion can occasionally lead to complications that harm a woman or reduce her chance of ever conceiving again. No form of birth control is totally reliable, and increased sexual activity leads to an increase in the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Dangerous sexual practices in some cultures have led to the rapid spread of the deadly AIDS virus.

Our modern television culture does not always emphasize the difference between love and sex. Many pop musicians, moviemakers, and advertising agencies, knowing what sells, have turned their art forms into soft pornography. Children are being encouraged to become sexually active at increasingly younger ages. Because of this predictable lack of responsibility, many concerned parents and grandparents are turning to conservative politicians for protection.

Now that memories of the sexual revolution have faded, having explored the possibilities and discovered the consequences, the modern world is now slowly settling into a democratic balance between the desires of the young and the concerns of the old, with consideration for the needs of both families and singles.

There are no perfect rules for governing sexual behavior, but a wise person would never allow themselves to be driven by the pursuit of sexual pleasure at the cost of their health, their reputation, or their peace of mind. And they would never engage in any activity that was harmful to others or damaging to the welfare of the wider community.

Shattering the Sacred Myths - Chapter 13

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Modern Materialism

Analyzes the modern political power struggle and the emergence of secular beliefs like existentialism and humanism.

Many people think that social change occurs when innovative thinkers formulate new ideas which then gain widespread acceptance. This does occasionally happen, but it is probably more realistic to say that social change occurs whenever new inventions change the way that people behave and interact, or when new discoveries change the way that people see their place in the wider world.

Before the modern era, technological advancement was slow and new discoveries were rare. Cultures stayed the same or changed so slowly that the change was barely noticeable. Without having witnessed any significant change or even being able to imagine how change might happen, people

formed the impression that the world would remain more or less the same forever. Any hope for change rested on the anticipation of divine intervention.

On the rare occasion when noticeable change did occur, and when this change led to advances in comfort or knowledge, people began to develop a sense that civilization was slowly but steadily improving and they grew hopeful of further change in the future.

The Modern Age

The invention of gunpowder revolutionized warfare. The invention of the printing press in Europe gave people exposure to ideas other than those presented in the Bible. The invention of the magnetic compass and other navigational aids allowed European ships to explore the world.

Improvements in the manufacture of lenses for reading glasses led to the invention of the telescope. Gravity was soon discovered by observing the orbits of the planets around the sun and this led to the formulation of scientific laws describing the motion of objects.

While discovery, invention, and economic growth were generally welcomed, conservative thinkers did not trust the social changes that often accompanied them. Organizations like the church and the aristocracy claimed that any change to the traditional way of living might lead to disaster. But their real motive for resisting change was that they feared losing their privileged positions of power and wealth.

By the middle of the 1600s, the Catholic Church had lost its grip on power. Over the following century, as the colonization of America fuelled an expansion of trade and commerce, the aristocracy began losing its grip on power too.

The momentum of scientific, technological, and economic progress now seemed unstoppable, and this caused a longing for political change, culminating in the American and French revolutions. The fate of the modern world was then sealed with the invention of the steam engine and the beginning of the industrial age.

The death of God

By the end of the 1800s, science was providing answers to many of the great mysteries of nature. Everything from the creation of the world to the workings of the human mind was gradually being explained without any reference to God. Science seemed to be successfully replacing religion as the final authority for truth. Among those who were fortunate enough to learn about science and were able to understand it, many became convinced that we should only believe in explanations that can be proven to be true by scientific methods.

In Europe and America, the picture of the universe painted by Christianity and its understanding of human nature had been completely discredited by science. As the influence of the churches began to decline, church leaders became fearful of scientific discovery and they struggled to resist social change.

Despite being seen by many as stubborn, outdated, and hypocritical institutions committed to a failing mythology, the churches continued to be supported by conservative community leaders. In a world where our animal instincts can lead us to overvalue sexual gratification, and where the pressures of daily survival can drive us to behave in selfish, aggressive, and uncaring ways, traditional religion was upheld as society's most reputable moral authority, reinforcing community and family values like generosity, self-sacrifice, and self-restraint.

Progressive churches struggled to compromise with scientific explanations, but the interpretation of religious scripture can only be stretched so far before people begin losing faith and start looking for new beliefs. Without any intellectual credibility and with their moral authority under serious question, conservative churches maintained their following by reinforcing herd conformity and hatred of difference, especially in rural communities.

Many educated people still believed in God, but no longer believed that traditional religion offered the best way to understand God. Others could see no reason to believe in God at all. Religion was perceived to be a hindrance to the progress of humankind, and there was widespread hope that it would slowly wither away and be replaced by a scientific understanding of existence. Many were

beginning to feel that if the idea of God was not yet dead, then it was the duty of modern science and philosophy to kill him.

Existentialism

After centuries of groundbreaking scientific discovery, many scientifically minded people now see the universe as working like a mindless cosmic machine. Every component in the machine, from the smallest subatomic particle to the largest galaxy, is constrained to follow the laws of nature, and these laws can never be broken.

From a purely scientific point of view, human beings could be described as self-preserving, self-replicating, biological machines, responding to stimulus and adapting to change. An accident of nature sparked the first replication billions of years ago, and then through an accumulation of advantageous mutations, the unbroken chain of generations led to the rise of modern humans.

In evolutionary terms, it could be said that we are still little more than clever monkeys clinging to a piece of space rock, floating near the edge of a galaxy, several billion years after the dawn of time. We have only just emerged from the forests and caves, confused and disorganized, chattering amongst ourselves and squabbling over trivialities, blissfully unaware of our impending fate.

We come from nothingness, each of us being born by mere chance. And at the end of our short and often miserable lives, our bodies decay and our minds dissolve away and become nothing. We return to nothingness, and forever we shall be as though we had never been. Our possessions will be dispersed, and in time, our names will be forgotten and nothing will remain of the world that we once knew. Finally, at the end of time, the universe will grow cold and die.

Our instincts and emotions might make us think that our lives are important, but it would not make the slightest difference in the grand scheme of things if the entire human race were to be wiped out by some unfortunate event. The stars would continue to shine and the galaxies would continue to drift aimlessly through space, completely oblivious to our passing. We are alone in an immense and unfeeling universe.

This way of thinking has led many to the agonizing realization that our lives are totally meaningless. But rather than surrendering to feelings of despair and depression over the meaninglessness of it all, existentialist philosophers tell us that our mission must be to find a way to give our lives some meaning by embracing those activities that generate a sense of value in our lives. While some people find their reason for living through hard work and achievement, others find comfort in their family and friends, or in the enjoyment of life's many pleasures.

The vast majority of people, however, will never accept that our world has no true purpose in nature. They are always going to want to believe that their lives have cosmic significance, and that humankind has some special relationship to the forces that created the universe.

For some people, like those who suffer through pain and misery and those who have no hope of ever being happy, the only reason for continuing to live, other than for the love of their family and friends, is for the anticipation of playing some small part in a meaningful greater scheme.

Science alone may not be able to provide people with a sense of universal purpose and guidance using logic and reason, but most people respond to shallow emotional sensationalism rather than cold logical reasoning anyway. Most people would rather believe in magical spirits than in mathematical relationships, and they would rather think that some mystical guru knew the answers to everything rather than try to make sense out of the conflicting opinions of skeptical academics.

Humanism

In the search for an alternative to traditional religious morality, the existentialist philosophers declared that we are all free to decide what is right and wrong for ourselves. They said that personal experience is the only reliable guide for our actions. But they also warned of the risks and responsibilities that come from being free to make our own choices. We define ourselves through our actions, and we all have to live with wherever our decisions lead us.

While some people wanted complete freedom from moral restraint, others anticipated the rise of a new moral order based upon a rational belief in the common good. As the industrialized world began

to embrace political freedom, a new foundation for morality did emerge, widely known as 'humanism'. Humanism can be described as an unquestioning faith in the inherent value of every human life and a belief in the fundamental rights of every person.

Humanism promotes all of the positive caring and sharing values that civilized society has developed over the centuries through the lessons of human experience and the power of human reason. Humanist values can easily be justified as being in the best long term interests of both the individual and the wider community by enhancing the quality of relationships and reducing the risk of conflict.

For many people today, 'secular humanism' offers an agreeable alternative to traditional religion. While rejecting religious superstition, secular humanists embrace the compassionate and caring values once preached by religion. In reaction to accusations by some religious groups that non-believers can have no real faith in universal goodness, secular humanists point out that virtues like kindness, justice, and generosity often work better when they are not associated with religious beliefs.

The secular humanist tradition has been growing steadily over the centuries, and like a religion, it has its own set of inspired writings, its own version of history, and its own collection of myths and heroes. But attempts by some secular humanist groups to define universal principles and values have only resulted in shallow and unconvincing documents that seem to change with the politics of the times.

Although secular humanism has gained an enormous following, especially among scientifically minded people, it still rests entirely upon blind faith in some convenient concept of goodness rather than solid reasoning based on scientific facts. Unless consciousness evolved for a higher purpose, then human life can only be said to have value if we choose to believe so.

However, there are plenty of examples of times and places where people have chosen not to believe in the value of human life. Even today, many politicians, military officers, criminals, and businessmen around the world consider human life to be a cheap commodity that can be thrown away like worthless trash when it no longer appears to be useful.

The power struggle

Despite ongoing attempts to construct a cooperative moral philosophy based entirely upon reason rather than faith, no such philosophy has yet survived the scrutiny of the critics. It is easy to make bold statements about right and wrong but almost impossible to prove them to be true. It is not easy to convince people to restrain themselves against their own selfish interests unless some higher authority has the power and is prepared to use it to enforce restraint.

Nietzsche argued that unless our assertions about morals and values are based upon solid metaphysical foundations then they are just meaningless rhetoric. Now that the idea of God is dying, he wrote, we should abandon any sentimental notions of right and wrong. Such notions are merely the residual effects of baseless religious and philosophical moralizing. He said that the only solid foundation upon which we can build a system of morals and values is on the conscious struggle for power.

Without any cosmic plan to give us purpose, our lives become nothing more than the complex interactions between atoms and molecules. If there is no ultimate goal for these interactions, then any attempt to make moral judgments about human behavior would be the same as saying, "this chemical reaction is good, and this one is bad". Without having been carved into the bedrock of existence by some ultimate authority, any ideas about right and wrong can only be described as whatever was in our best interests at the time.

But what is best for one person is not always best for others. The claim that we can make the best of our situation by seeking the greatest happiness for the most number of people might sound good to most people, but why should it be accepted by someone who would gladly seek their own happiness at the expense of everyone else?

The conflicting interests of competing groups often leads to differences of opinion about right and wrong, and these differences of opinion can easily escalate into political power struggles. The winners of these struggles usually get to impose their own ideas about right and wrong upon everyone else.

Claiming to be morally superior is a useful tactic when struggling for political power, but when such claims depend only upon blind faith, self interest, or misguided idealism, then they can easily be dismissed by opponents as nothing more than opinion or propaganda.

Philosophers in the 1700s wrote that all men are equal and have a right to be free. The American Declaration of Independence states that all men have a right to pursue life, liberty, and happiness. Such claims might have sounded good, and they did give inspiration to the oppressed masses struggling to free themselves from tyranny, but without being able to explain why we have these rights, other than arguing that they are 'self-evident' or using some other hollow form of logic, then they can only really be described as persuasive political propaganda.

Claims about equality, fairness, and the inherent value of each human life might be influential in the struggle for power, but when they are tested, they cannot be proven to be true. Having them as slogans embedded in the culture, or as political declarations written into national constitutions might give them extra power, but not everlasting legitimacy.

Human rights

The most important moral development in recent times has been the establishment of 'human rights'. The human rights movement rose to prominence after the two world wars and the end of colonial racism. Human rights have now become the moral foundation of the modern age, written into the constitution of the United Nations and recognized by international law.

Although many people around the world now consider human rights to be sacred, the truth is that humans have no natural or God given rights. Whatever political rights we now enjoy, previous generations had to fight and sometimes die for. And these rights could be taken away from us at any time by imperialist superpowers, religious fundamentalists, industrial military elitists, or any other group that would try to deceive and enslave us if they could.

We will forever be forced to keep fighting for whatever political rights we have gained. If there is anything sacred about human rights, it comes from the hopes of those who have suffered, and from the blood of those who have died fighting for the cause of freedom in the historic struggle against self-serving opportunists and ideological extremists.

The fight to define human rights is a political battle in which persuasion is the key weapon. For people with progressive ideals, human rights include the right to food and shelter, the right to education and healthcare, and the right to free and fair elections. And the battle for these rights will not end until they have been enshrined in international law and are guaranteed for every person in the world.

Conservatism

At the other end of the political spectrum, for people with conservative ideals, accusations of human rights abuse might be useful when vilifying hostile governments, but conservative politicians in the industrialized world prefer to talk about freedom; like the freedom to compete in a free market economy, free from the restriction of any national or international regulation.

They reject the welfare oriented viewpoint of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, instead placing their faith in the power of market forces to determine right and wrong.

Since the early days of capitalism, conservative thinkers have believed that as long as the industrious are motivated by incentive and the poor are motivated by fear, then continued economic growth will be automatic, as if guided by some kind of invisible hand. Yet they rarely question the direction in which the hand is pushing or the reason for wanting to get there so quickly regardless of the human or environmental costs. They simply see continued development as an opportunity for profit, and they want to maximize development through unrestrained competition.

Some conservative business leaders dream of a world without welfare, where the workers are forced to compete for the lowest possible wages while the poor are left to starve and die. After all, there is no mercy in the cut throat world of business. Competition is fierce in the international marketplace. Staying in business requires stretching the rules as far as possible to minimize expenses and maximize profits. While buyers look for the best bargains, sellers try for the highest possible price while putting the least amount of effort into their products and services.

There may be widespread desire for ethical business practices, but it would be foolish to trust anyone in the business world. A person's word is worthless without an ironclad contract and enough money to enforce it in a court of law. Maintaining a respectable reputation may help to attract customers, but in the end, business is business.

Many wealthy Westerners believe that their wealth is evidence of their superiority. They carry no shame that their family fortunes were largely built upon stolen land, stolen mineral wealth, mass murder, and slavery. Whenever the desire for profit has been stronger than feelings of moral restraint, imperialist opportunists have always considered it to be good business to subjugate foreign lands and harvest their resources.

When the European empires were finally forced to free their slave colonies, they did not free them, but instead left them suffering under the rule of egomaniac army officers. Imperialist profiteers then lent part of their ill-gotten gains to these dictators, knowing the money would be stolen and wasted.

As the plundered nations now struggle towards democracy, imperialist loan sharks like the International Monetary Fund insist on the repayment of these loans under predatory economic conditions that leave the children of these plundered nations crippled forever by debt, vulnerable to be violated forever more.

While demanding that developing nations open their markets to unfettered foreign competition, Western governments use hostile patent laws and other indefensible forms of corporate welfare to ensure that those nations that were slow to industrialize can never catch up.

Still the wealthy Western nations continue to cheat on international trade. Because of European rivalries and the undemocratic distribution of United States senate seats, American and European farm subsidies force down world prices and destroy the incomes of many smaller agricultural nations.

Meanwhile, Western corporations exploit poverty stricken countries by paying slave wages to children working in factories producing luxury goods. They bribe corrupt government officials for permission to spoil the forest homelands of native people. They plunder the mineral wealth, poison the rivers with toxic waste, and harvest marine life to the point of extinction. They even fuel wars in order to profit from selling weapons. Share price is all that matters in the minds of their investors.

While many people feel outraged by the selfishness and lack of fairness, others realize that there are no reliable foundations for such idealistic armchair moralizing. We are all merely pawns in the evolutionary competition for survival and the conscious struggle for power. Everyone must fight for their own preservation.

As a general rule, whenever one group gains a position of power, they will almost always try to use it to further their own interests at the expense of everyone else. Other groups can try to resist, but unless they can effectively threaten those in power, then resistance is futile.

Memories of power abuse can breed lasting hostility, and so whenever those in power actually think about the consequences of their actions, then they will usually restrain themselves out of fear of losing respect or gaining enemies. But they will still try to get away with as much as they possibly can before resistance rises to a point where the costs start to outweigh the benefits.

Although many people dream of an ideal world based upon caring, sharing, and cooperation; such a dream world seems far from the practical world where people, companies, and nations must compete for limited resources. Claims about equality, fairness, human rights, or any other moral assertion can easily be rejected by greed-driven opportunists as 'socialism', which they condemn as nothing more than the selfish political expression of the jealousies and ambitions of the poor.

Progressivism

Conservative thinkers believe that selfishness is the key to progress and that competition is nature's way. They believe that history has clearly shown that only greed and fear can be relied upon to motivate and restrain us.

Progressive thinkers, on the other hand, have more faith in the power of human reason. They believe that we should always use our knowledge and historical experience to think carefully and make informed judgments about the direction in which the world is heading.

They believe that planning and cooperation must always be employed to oversee the blind competition for resources and profit. Greed must be restrained in order to minimize destructive outcomes. Economic growth works best when it benefits everyone and not just the aggressive few.

Progressives believe that by developing a realistic vision about what we want our future to be, we should be able to unite the entire world to cooperate and work together towards the accomplishment of a common goal.

Democracy

Before the emergence of democracy, political disagreements were resolved through naked power, often unrestrained by reason or morality. Changes of government required popular uprisings, military coups, or foreign invasions. Short periods of violence were often followed by long periods of oppression.

Wealth was concentrated in the hands of those whose ancestors had wreaked the most terror and plundered the most riches. The only way for the poor to change this seemingly unfair arrangement was to overthrow the ruling class and redistribute the wealth.

The beauty of democracy is that it allows a nonviolent management of this power struggle. Brute force is replaced by the delicate art of persuasion. The health and success of a democracy can be measured by the degree to which conflict is minimized.

Whenever the capitalists forget that the masses need to have enough money to consume the junk that the supermarkets sell, then the socialists will be elected to redistribute the wealth. And when the socialists start throwing money away, and the greed and jealousy of the masses reaches a threshold, then the capitalists will be reelected to reward the profitable and punish the lazy.

This democratic tug of war between two selfish political ideologies, capitalism and socialism, results in a self adjusting system where national economies maintain the best possible balance of tax rates, corporate regulations, minimum wages, and welfare payments; providing conditions for maximum economic success as we continue to ride the highs and lows of the global economic rollercoaster towards some uncharted technological wonderland.

Every nation goes through periods when the political tension rises too high and the government is thrown out of office. Even in nations without effective democratic political systems, changes of government are inevitable. Without democracy, it is only a question of how it will happen, when it will happen, and how wisely the violence can be minimized.

As long as the nations of the world continue to compete against each other for limited resources then periodic global conflicts will be inevitable. Only when the political tensions between nations can be resolved and global resources can be agreeably distributed by an international assembly of elected representatives will world peace ever become achievable and lasting global prosperity be assured.

The twentieth century

By the beginning of the twentieth century, astonishing advancements in science and technology were inspiring a universal optimism for the coming of a golden age. But it soon became apparent that knowledge and invention do not always bring peace and prosperity, as many had anticipated, but sometimes also tyranny and slaughter. For much of the world's population, the wars, genocides, and oppressions of the twentieth century destroyed any comforting faith in man's inherent goodness or the healthy outcome of his passions.

With every advance in technology came the inevitable development of deadlier weapons. Military strength is a powerful temptation, and like all temptations, it has an irresistible quality that makes it impossible to restrain. All of the best intentions in the world cannot stop military strength from being used to gain a political and economic advantage. As long as the weapons and the opportunity to use them exist then it is just a matter of time before conditions permit the rise of warmongers whose ideology justifies their use.

After the Second World War, Europe's cities were in ruins, its empires had collapsed, and its commanding influence on the world stage had come to an end; too weak now to resist the ominous expansion of the Russian communist empire, the closing of the iron curtain, cold war spy games, and

a massive buildup of nuclear weapons. For decades the world teetered on the brink of total annihilation. Generations of young were raised in a culture of fear for the seemingly inevitable launch of a global nuclear apocalypse.

Meanwhile, the capitalist industrial military machine was growing dangerously powerful. Driven by unrestrained greed and arrogance, it was lying to its people, starting wars for profit, poisoning the earth in a desperate bid to exploit every possible resource, and assembling enough nuclear weapons to destroy the world many times over. Long term survival meant little in the face of short term political and economic gain.

By the second half of the century, there was a growing loss of faith in mankind's ability to manage his own destiny. In spite of improving education, it was beginning to appear that our cultural and spiritual development was not keeping pace with our technological advancement. Fortunately for us, this troublesome imbalance began to change when improvements in electronics led to the mass production of affordable televisions.

The Great Social Revolution

No single invention has had a greater impact on world culture than television. As televisions filled the living rooms of family homes across the industrialized world, a new awareness began to take shape. Popular television show characters became role models for free-thinking humanist values. Nightly news reports exposed the rottenness and corruption of the old postwar industrial and military political establishment. New generations were beginning to learn more from watching television than they were from listening to their parents and teachers. Desire for change began to spread among many of the young.

New musical instruments like the electric guitar and affordable home stereos led to a revolution in popular music. New forms of music like 'rock and roll' expressed a growing desire for freedom, and most young people liked what they were hearing. But conservative Christians were deeply disturbed by the growing popularity of rock music. Musicians like the Beatles and Rolling Stones were accused of promoting communism and leading young people into a sinful orgy of sex and drugs. One pope even called for world governments to ban rock music.

Meanwhile, the musicians themselves, being the poets of their time, preached that love was the answer. In a world that often makes no sense, love can seem like the only thing that has any meaning or value. Almost everyone wants to love and be loved. We grow so much through our experiences of love, and we often remember these experiences as being the most valuable of our lives. By convincing people to accept love as the core of their values, it was hoped that we could finally end the violence and oppression and find a new way to live together in peace and harmony.

A feeling of revolution filled the air. The increasingly rebellious youth were tired of the old culture of religious morality and unaccountable military aggression. The time had finally come to rid the world of discrimination and injustice. Students and other activist groups began protesting for racial equality, sexual freedom, gay liberation, and women's rights. Peace protestors marched the streets chanting slogans like "make love not war". They no longer wanted to see young men being forced against their will to become cannon fodder for big business interests overseas.

The streets erupted into violence in many cities around the world as frightened governments used armed force to crush demonstrations. But street violence on television is always bad publicity for governments. The old postwar political establishment was soon thrown out of power and the cultural conservatives were forced to retreat. In the decades that followed, many of the laws were rewritten, many of the oppressed were liberated, and many of the old rivalries and hatreds were forgiven and forgotten.

The price of freedom

During the 1970s, mainstream television culture broke free from its traditional cultural restraints. The collective television consciousness was now floating freely from one marketable fashion to the next, driven by popular desires, and descending to the lowest common denominator, before eventually settling into a democratic equilibrium, with public opinion reflecting the prevailing political climate, periodically wavering between liberal and conservative attitudes.

Christianity was unable to sell itself on mainstream television in any credible way and it very quickly lost its dominating influence over mainstream western culture. Church leaders came under attack for their oppressive and often offensive views. They were forced to drop their fire and brimstone rhetoric, at least for a while, as they tried to rekindle Christianity's more loving forms of expression. While many still called themselves Christians out of loyalty to tradition, for the first time in more than a thousand years, real church-going Christians were in the minority.

Driven by a sense of urgency, a coalition of arms manufacturers, oil industry executives, investment bankers, Christian television evangelists, corporate media propagandists, and conservative politicians began using patriotism, nationalism, religious revivalism, and every other technique in the art of conservative political persuasion to try to reestablish control over the minds of the impressionable majority.

Having finally succeeded in liberating the oppressed, with no purpose left to unite them, socialist political forces disintegrated. As the natural representatives of relativism and skepticism, they inevitably lost faith in the notion of progress and were no longer able to attract a following by presenting an inspiring vision of the future. They only really exist now as an alternative to conservatism. But the conservatives have been able to exploit Islamic terrorism and East Asian communist aggression by arguing that socialism's humanist values and political correctness have left the western world blind and defenseless.

Postmodernism

With the spread of democracy and the end of institutionalized racism, governments around the world are becoming increasingly cooperative; and increased communication, trade, travel, and migration between nations has led to an intermingling of diverse cultures, and a growing acceptance that we are all citizens of a global community.

People from different cultural backgrounds often have widely differing beliefs. In order to promote peace and justice in a world that has historically known only war and discrimination, most countries are finally embracing the core democratic principles of 'freedom of opinion' and 'tolerance for all beliefs'. Conflict between differing beliefs can no longer be used as an excuse for violence and war.

In order for democracy to work, everyone must be free to have their own opinion. If experience has taught us anything, it is that anyone who claims to know the absolute truth (especially the political or religious truth) must be looked upon with suspicion, as they are often driven to try to dominate others with their particular version of reality.

Even the values that gave rise to the modern world, values like 'progress' and 'science' have been condemned by some special interest groups as being oppressive and dogmatic. By the end of the twentieth century, the rejection of any claims about absolute truths or values, even modern values, had evolved into a popular academic philosophy called 'postmodernism'.

At its best, postmodernism provides a theoretical framework for describing diverse cultures, beliefs, and historical perspectives without discounting the value of any one group's experience. And it allows skeptical intellectuals to tactfully ignore the claims of Christian fundamentalists, Marxist academics, and other ideological absolutists without appearing rude or provocative.

At its worst though, postmodernism has turned into the very thing that it was originally opposed to, as some over-enthusiastic relativists have pushed it to the extreme, aggressively condemning any attempt to strive towards an actual truth. Postmodernism has even become an excuse for ignorance. According to some postmodern relativists, the modern world is no better than the prehistoric world, and scientific theories have no greater value than religious myths.

Despite its excesses, postmodernism is the philosophical embodiment of our democratic freedom to be skeptical and criticize everything. It plays a vital role in helping to prevent ideological extremism from gaining popular momentum and silencing all opposition like it has throughout most of human history.

Materialism

In the democratic world, different ideas about the meaning of life are now free to compete for a share of the market for popular beliefs. But in the absence of any appealing choices, with no coherent worldview worthy of capturing the popular imagination, people are left to form their own view of the world through scraps of information from here and there.

Superstitions like fortune telling, psychic phenomena, new age mysticism, extraterrestrial cults, and even witchcraft are on the rise as people take meaning from anywhere they can find it. Mainstream culture has fractured into a multitude of differing lifestyles and attitudes. While the variety of choices may suit individual tastes, families and communities are disintegrating as people become increasingly alienated from one another by differences of opinion and a lack of common understandings.

Asleep in the materialist dream where only money and beauty matter, many young people care only about what other people think of them, while trying to be what they think other people want them to be. Without the guidance of any believable moral authority, they look to movie stars, music idols, and sporting heroes as their role models. They take their values from fashionable pop culture trends, and they live their lives learning mostly from their mistakes. When the world fails to provide them with anything worth believing in, they often become cynical, suspicious of authority, rebellious, angry at life, and sometimes even self destructive.

As they stumble through one life-crisis after the next, disillusioned by society, isolated by failing relationships, and burdened by years of shameful memories and regrets, they become yet another lost generation, looking for comfort in the wisdom of television pop psychologists, or seeking guidance from the growing industry of self-help books and seminars. They are told to stay positive and not to focus on negatives; the path to happiness and financial success is through courage, discipline, self-respect, and commitment.

However, the pop psychologists cannot risk losing market share by challenging popular myths, and so they fail to provide any real answers to the deeper questions that people are asking. They treat the symptoms using motivational therapy rather than curing the disease by offering peace of mind through understanding.

Understanding

Seeing the need for greater social cohesion, political conservatives are becoming increasingly forceful in their efforts to encourage a return to traditional religious values. However, the resurgence of religious fundamentalism is only encouraging greater skepticism and social division as it threatens to undo the positive social changes of the last few centuries. And as hostility grows between conflicting fundamentalist beliefs, with escalating global conflict and increased military spending, the conservative vision is a recipe for disaster.

There is nothing to be gained by promoting religious myths over scientific knowledge, or by throwing away centuries of social progress to return to outdated and oppressive ideas of right and wrong. Yet there is everything to be gained by presenting the best of our scientific and moral knowledge in such a convincing way that it unites the entire world community behind a common sense of purpose.

Conservatives can do their best to resist it, and relativist skeptics can try to deny it, but as our technology continues to improve, as our knowledge and experience grows, and as our collective understanding becomes increasingly refined, eventually a single coherent worldview will emerge that is as near to the truth as possible, and it will be something that every clear-minded rational thinker can easily agree with.

The most admirable work of modern thinkers, writers, and filmmakers is to describe our situation here on earth as clearly and accurately as possible, using words that are simple enough for everybody to understand, while at the same time encouraging cooperation between both individuals and nations, to improve our chances of surviving through this period of rapid technological and social change.

Deepening Consciousness

Describes consciousness as a natural phenomenon and establishes a theoretical foundation for justice based upon the democratic decisions of free and educated people.

Science can be described as a collection of information that has been carefully filtered to remove any impurities, leaving only the closest thing that we have to the truth at this time in history. The scientific community can be described as a group of intellectual elitists who are committed to keeping this valuable collection of information free from fantasy and superstition, and uncontaminated by politics or religion.

Members of the scientific community are generally uncompromising in their condemnation of any irrational ideas or unprovable claims. Disputes and disagreements are a normal part of this process, and we can only hope that by carefully examining the theories and the evidence, and through open debate, scientific reasoning will continue to prevail in the pursuit of rational truth.

For those scientists who study the physical properties of the universe, each theory must be able to accurately predict the results of an experiment, and we have learned to expect that every detail can be neatly described using mathematical equations. As physical scientists continue to discover the secrets of matter and energy, and as this knowledge finds practical applications in fields like engineering and medicine, we continue to enjoy the fruits of advancing technology.

Compared to the physical sciences, despite more than a century of research, the social sciences have failed to agree on any reliable theories about human nature or the nature of human society.

Social sciences like anthropology, sociology, and psychology emerged from the political and social revolutions of the 1800s, when new scientific discoveries were destroying the intellectual credibility of Christianity. No longer held back by fear of religious persecution, and no longer satisfied with the speculations of philosophers, scientifically minded thinkers confidently set out to apply scientific methods to the study of humankind.

However, because of the fluidity of the human mind and the complexity of everyday social interactions, human behavior soon proved to be too difficult to predict with any degree of certainty.

In the absence of any measurable quantities or objective standards, the best that can be done is to compare different cultures or collect and analyze statistics. But because of the countless uncontrollable variables of everyday life, it is almost always impossible to reach any reliable conclusions.

Social realities are so complex that any kind of social theory can only ever be a generalized approximation. Any attempt to describe human behavior quickly becomes bogged down by the limitations of human language. Achieving a perfectly clear explanation requires more effort than most social scientists are prepared to give. Unrefined explanations are easily misinterpreted, and most contributions to social science have been spoiled by ambiguities, arbitrary categorizations, and subjective valuations.

Ideology

From the very beginning, the uncertainties and inaccuracies of social science created opportunities for ideological extremists to interpret observations in ways that justified their own political agendas. Claiming to have science on your side is a powerful form of political propaganda, and social science immediately became a battlefield in the struggle for political power.

Most people recognize that we inherit some of our behavioral characteristics from our parents while other characteristics are shaped over our lifetime by our social interactions and other environmental influences. But many early social theorists overstressed the importance of hereditary characteristics in order to justify continuing racial discrimination, sexism, and class distinction. They said that the

reason why some cultures are more advanced than others is because some groups of people are biologically superior.

Such potentially destructive ideas were fiercely resisted by other theorists who maintained that all people have roughly the same mental capabilities regardless of their race, sex, or class. The human brain is highly adaptable and everyone has the ability learn new skills.

Other theorists went even further, saying that no culture can be said to be more advanced than any other. Each culture has followed its own equally valid path to the present time, regardless of their current level of technology or material wealth. Every traditional culture deserves equal respect despite what its people believe or how they behave.

Some theorists even rejected the significance of technological change, refusing to admit that patterns of human behavior adapt over time to suit the prevailing technological conditions, insisting instead that human choice plays a greater role in defining culture than any materialistic influence. This way of thinking better suited Christian and Marxist hopes of reconstructing society and reinventing human nature in order to bring about their promised utopias.

More concerned about political outcomes or moral sensitivities than scientific objectivity, and often ignoring any evidence contrary to their position, these kinds of ideologies have been battling to dominate social science since the 1800s. Support for each ideology has shifted over the decades in response to European imperialism, world war, the spread of communism, the Great Social Revolution, and the postmodern age.

Under the influence of postmodernism, many social scientists have now lost faith in the possibility of discovering any reliable patterns in human nature or in the nature of human society. They instead prefer to believe that human history is just a disconnected series of meaningless events. Concepts like 'progress' and 'civilization' are rejected as myths invented to uphold Western cultural values. Cultures may be observed, but any attempt to compare or evaluate them based upon any notion of progress raises the fear of cultural discrimination and racism. Any attempt to justify the emergence of the modern world is condemned as being a rationalization for oppression.

Many students of postmodern social science no longer even believe in the scientific method, and those that still do believe often feel so disillusioned that they give up any hope of ever eradicating the political bias, moral censorship, anti-scientific sentiment, and pseudo-science from their profession.

Many scientifically minded people now believe that the traditional social sciences are so paralyzed by relativism and skepticism, and so crippled by political correctness, that they should be abandoned in favor of new disciplines like sociobiology and evolutionary psychology that derive their ideas directly from the theory of evolution.

Over the next few decades, computerized neurobiological models should become powerful enough to simulate the functioning of the human brain, and they may eventually become sophisticated enough to simulate the complex interactions of human society. This should bring an end to many of the uncertainties of social science. Even then, we may never be able to account for all of the biological, environmental, historical, and technological factors that create our human world.

However, no computer model will ever be able to answer the ultimate question of human existence, the question of whether consciousness has any kind of cosmic purpose. This question is relevant to social science because the ultimate determinant of all social theory is metaphysical.

Social theories that assume the evolution of humankind was a mere accident of nature and the discovery of advanced technology was an unplanned consequence are philosophically incompatible with social theories that allow for the possibility that consciousness might have evolved to fulfill some kind of cosmic purpose.

Metaphysics

Most people want their lives to have meaning and purpose, and they want moral guidance so badly that they are prepared to gamble away their understanding of existence by basing their beliefs on myths and superstitions. They choose traditional religion, new age mysticism, or some other supernatural explanation because social science has not yet been able to popularize any all-embracing social theory that offers people a sense of purpose and guidance based on scientific rationality.

Other people want facts, or they want freedom from religious moral oppression. They reject metaphysical considerations because the only explanations that they are aware of that offer purpose and guidance are based upon traditional religious myths that are so corrupted by lies and stained by blood that it seems like a miracle that anyone can still believe in them.

For these people, losing any sense of purpose might seem like a small price to pay for rationality and freedom, but while some rationalists might be mentally strong enough to overcome the inevitable existential crisis, finding their sense of value in self-expression and self-realization, others are finding it increasingly difficult to stay sane when their lives have no perceivable meaning.

Almost all evolutionary biologists today believe that the evolution of humankind was a totally random and purposeless process. Almost all social scientists agree with them, believing that humans have no higher purpose beyond whatever purpose each individual or community chooses for themselves. This is understandable, given that speculating about any unproven purpose would be unscientific.

Yet we still have no conclusive proof as to whether the evolution of intelligent life was 'planned' or not, and so the whole enterprise of modern science seems to be based upon an unproven assumption. In many ways, today's scientific community acts like a secular priesthood of purposelessness, preaching the teachings of the prophets of meaninglessness.

Until now, science has only ever attempted to describe reality assuming that consciousness has no purpose. It has not yet seriously attempted to describe reality from the point of view that maybe consciousness does have a purpose. By ignoring one of the two very real possibilities and basing their entire system of knowledge on an unproven assumption, perhaps they are missing half of the picture.

The accumulation of information

Perhaps the skeptical scientists are right, and intelligent life did arise unplanned from an ultimate cosmic chaos. But if they are wrong and intelligent life did evolve for a reason, then consciousness and everything that flows from it must be as much a part of the natural universe as matter and energy are. And like matter and energy, perhaps consciousness is bound by natural laws that can also be described using mathematical relationships.

Let us imagine that consciousness is a force of nature; not quite the same as other physical forces like gravity, more of an abstract informational force. In a similar way to how the force of gravity attracts matter, the force of consciousness seems to have a tendency to collect information. As consciousness evolved, it allowed animals to collect information through their senses and store it in their memories.

A group of individuals who share information might be said to have a group consciousness. The power of speech allowed early humans to share information and pass it on to new generations. But as individual memories faded over time, only the most frequently used information remained in the group memory.

As markings on clay tablets were slowly refined to become words on paper, information could be preserved and made available to distant future generations. A recording of historic events and a body of information on valuable subjects began to accumulate. Group memory was slowly becoming more permanent, but only those writings that were copied and cared for over the centuries survived.

As information continued to accumulate, various religious, philosophical, and scientific explanations of our existence began to compete for believers. But the quality of these explanations was limited by the lack of verifiable facts, and by the difficulty of using human language to communicate complex concepts in a way that could be easily understood.

Following the invention of the printing press, a healthy profit could be made from publishing books. Driven by market forces and by a natural enthusiasm for sharing knowledge, a dedicated army of authors began to collect and summarize unprecedented quantities of information. Vast collections of books began to accumulate in homes and public libraries.

Modern science began with new inventions like the telescope and new discoveries like electricity. These provided new opportunities to study the world and the universe.

The collection of scientific knowledge now continues to grow as scientists compete with each other for the prestige of making new discoveries. Universities play a vital role in judging the value of new information and teaching as much of the truth as has yet been revealed.

With the rise of industry and the need for more educated workers, schools became training camps for office and factory jobs. Children are now programmed with ten or more years of practical knowledge and skills, and are then given a level of qualification which reflects how much information they absorbed.

Newspapers, magazines, television, and radio now compete with each other to distribute any information for which there might be a market. The modern mass media produces an overload of easily digestible information, with opinions and analysis, available for free to the public, paid for by advertisers.

While some media networks scrounge around for any information worth sensationalizing for a dollar, the accumulation of daily news reports are now forming an incredibly detailed recording of history; with words and images stored in digital format, easily searched, and with no deterioration in quality over time.

Rapidly advancing computer technologies like website databases are making it easier every year to collect and organize information to share with the rest of the world. Increasingly refined summaries of almost every kind of information are now freely available on millions of Internet websites.

Digital video cameras built into mobile phones now allow us to capture the memory of any moment. Our everyday experiences can be easily shared with our family and friends, and these experiences can be collected and stored to be studied later by other people.

There was a time when words flowed directly from the mind onto the page and editing was slow and difficult. Now with word processors, words can be reworked and refined until they are as close to perfect as the language allows.

And with high quality television documentaries being digitally edited and enhanced with special effects, even the illiterate can be educated in ways never before possible. The quality with which information can now be presented is only limited by the time taken and the effort expended.

Information overload

The information now exists for people to envisage a much more detailed picture of the world and reach much more profound conclusions about the workings of nature than ever before. But instead, we seem to be drowning in unfathomable amounts of information. We can only learn so much, only concentrate on one thing at a time, and we have trouble remembering even important things.

Few people can afford the time to learn even those things that are of practical use. We spend all of our time and energy every day just struggling to earn a living and make our relationships work. Sports and entertainment are much more interesting than trying to read and understand volumes of boring and often useless facts.

Our stone-age brains are struggling to appreciate the significance of this information revolution. Scientists still argue over the meaning of consciousness, and many people's minds are still snagged on religious beliefs which preach that any new information is a threat. For most people, personal happiness and economic success are much more valuable than knowledge about their existence.

Perhaps the mainstream of human consciousness will never reach the level of objective awareness where it sees itself as an abstract force of nature, collecting information in nature's scheme. Even university professors cannot agree on what nature's scheme might be, and many of them doubt that there is one. In human society, higher understandings often have little practical value anyway.

If consciousness did evolve for the purpose of collecting information, then perhaps all that humankind needs to do is to survive and prosper, and the information will continue to accumulate, and the technology needed to support this information will continue to be assembled, without us really needing to understand why.

Thinking computers

Imagine a consciousness that never sleeps and never loses concentration. Imagine that it can concentrate on many different thoughts at the same time. It gathers information from wherever it can, taking notice of even the smallest piece of information, never forgetting anything, and remembering every detail with crystal clarity.

Imagine that this consciousness reads every book, newspaper, magazine, and website; and watches every movie, television show, and documentary; in every language; and it never stops scanning the computer networks for new information.

It never stops processing this information, looking for patterns that might lead to new conclusions. The information gathered and the conclusions reached are never forgotten. These conclusions continue to accumulate, forming an ever more detailed picture of the world and the universe.

Now imagine that this consciousness is connected to every government and business database. It knows everything that has ever been recorded about you - your birth details, school reports, tax returns, license photos, blood test results, credit card transactions, supermarket purchases - it even knows your fingerprints and DNA.

People living under authoritarian dictatorships and even people living in democratic countries threatened by war rarely have their privacy protected, and so it might also know enough from listening to your telephone conversations and reading your emails to be able to predict what you are thinking.

Such a system is slowly being implemented across the world today. Information is being collected and new connections are being made between computer networks and databases, making the flow of information more efficient, and improving the decision making ability of governments and businesses.

When you add up all of the information being collected by both people and machines, and you consider all of the information being shared through human relationships and communication networks, and when you consider the increasing amounts of computing power available for processing this information, then you might be forgiven for thinking that the 'all seeing eye' and the 'all hearing ear' are slowly opening onto the 'all knowing network'.

Any information that now exists, especially information stored in digital format, will probably remain in existence for a very long time, maybe even until the flowering of consciousness that began here on earth comes to an end.

Consciousness

If we consider consciousness to be an abstract force of nature, then we can describe the human brain as a device for generating this force. Although we cannot easily measure the amount of consciousness generated by a person's brain, we can assume that it varies over time. When we are in deep sleep, we are barely conscious, and throughout the day, our consciousness might vary from idle observation to deep concentration.

Whenever we experience something, we absorb information through our senses, and we interpret this information with respect to our memories of similar experiences from the past. Whenever we think about something, we usually draw our conclusions from our knowledge of similar or related things.

Thinking requires knowledge (or information), and the act of thinking can be described as the processing of this information. For the sake of advancing this argument, let us define the amount of consciousness generated by a person's brain at a particular moment in time as being equal to the rate at which information is being processed.

However, we cannot say that the processing of false information contributes anything to consciousness. False information often leads to misunderstandings which distort our perception of reality. Contemplating things that are not real is more like dreaming than thinking, and so we would have to say that the value of each piece of information depends on how accurate it is.

We would also need to consider how relevant each piece of information was to a particular issue or event. Knowledge about cats would be of limited value if we were thinking about dogs.

Once again, for the sake of advancing this argument, let us define the total amount of consciousness generated by one person about a particular issue or event as being equal to the total amount of information processed while thinking about it.

Total consciousness = the sum of all information processed

Where the value of each piece of information depends on its accuracy and its relevance to the issue or event.

Opinion

After thinking about an issue or event, a person's feelings might range anywhere from extremely positive to extremely negative. When we remember an event, we also remember the feelings that we had about the event. These remembered feelings affect our future decisions, hopefully guiding us towards more successful outcomes.

A person's 'feelings' are a determinable quality which reflects the results of their thinking. But the value of a person's opinion cannot be measured by the strength of their feelings alone, we must also consider how much thinking they have done.

If a person does a lot of research and spends a long time thinking about an issue, then their opinion should have a much greater value than someone whose opinion is based upon wrong information, or based upon an instinctual reaction, or someone who simply believes whatever they are told.

For the sake of advancing this argument, let us define a person's 'opinion' about a particular issue or event as being equal to the total amount of consciousness that they generated while thinking about it multiplied by their resulting feelings.

Opinion = total consciousness generated * resulting feelings

Where the total consciousness generated is equal to the sum of all information processed. And where the value of each piece of information depends on its accuracy and relevance to the issue or event.

Morality

Opinions about right and wrong depend on a wide variety of factors, like the desire for happiness, the dream of harmonious coexistence, the performance of duty, the welfare of family and friends, the preservation of wealth and power, and an assortment of other practical and idealistic considerations.

We learn many of our ideas about right and wrong from our family and from the traditions of our society, and our opinions continue to be shaped by our own unique lifetime of experience and by our personal needs and desires.

Whenever there is a difference of opinion about right and wrong, the ensuing power struggle between groups with conflicting opinions will usually result over time in the formation of laws and values, and the establishment of institutions for enforcing these laws and values.

Things that happen in this universe do not have any inherent moral value. Despite the passionate claims of political and religious extremists, nothing is universally good or bad. Only when the force of consciousness is directed towards determining what is acceptable or unacceptable do issues or events gain moral value. And the greater the force of consciousness applied, the more accurate the moral judgment will be.

In order to take advantage of all of the lifetimes of knowledge and experience, and considering all of the time and effort that people have spent thinking about what is best for themselves and their community, let us define the 'moral value' of an issue or event as being equal to the sum of every person's 'opinion'.

Moral value = the sum of every person's 'opinion'

Where each person's 'opinion' is equal to the sum of all the information they processed while thinking about it, multiplied by their resulting feelings. And where the value of each piece of information depends on its accuracy and relevance to the issue or event.

Democracy

Modern democracy represents the above 'moral equation' in action. As the supporters and opponents of each issue battle it out in the news media, the population become educated, opinion polls influence government decisions, and people pass their judgment on the government's responsiveness at election time.

Democracy is often criticized because each person has equal voting power regardless of the accuracy of their information (regardless of whether their opinion is based upon knowledge, faith, greed, or fashion). However, any attempt to discriminate against people based on the quality of their information will inevitably be abused by some self-serving faction to seize permanent power.

We must expect democratic outcomes to be distorted by government propaganda, corporate media brainwashing, religious evangelizing, and a general shroud of ignorance. But as long as there is freedom of speech then there should at least be consensus among voters on practical issues that affect people's everyday survival.

We can see clear evidence of how effectively democracy has facilitated the moral equation. Many of the worst cases of corruption, discrimination, and injustice in the democratic world have now been addressed, and values like tolerance and fairness now have a powerful voice in democratic culture.

Many of the moral guidelines that were written down in ancient religious scriptures are now hopelessly out of date and often cause more problems than they solve. Opposition to religious moral oppression is growing, and with the spread of democracy, opponents are gaining the power to remove oppressive religious moral influences from the law.

Although the fixed moral values of ancient religious scriptures are slowly being superceded by modern democratic values, unless we can explain this moral progression using a scientific theory which describes consciousness as the only force in nature capable of making moral judgments, and which sees the democratic decisions of free and educated people as being the best theoretical foundation for justice, then the political debate about moral issues will continue to be clouded by religious myths.

Adaptable democratic values are the inevitable evolutionary outcome of the conscious struggle for power over time. As information technology continues to improve our ability to communicate and educate, as democratic institutions continue to be formed and reformed at the local, national, and international level, and as the laws are continually refined, our ongoing moral progress seems certain to provide an increasingly favorable environment in which consciousness can thrive and continue to grow.

Religious reform

If there was no cosmic plan, and the evolution of intelligent life was never intended, then there can be no real connection between evolution, consciousness, and technology. Any patterns that we see in nature would be purely the result of coincidence, and this is why secular science will never be able to provide us with any meaningful explanation for modern life, other than continuing to teach that life has no meaning.

However, by extending the theory of evolution to include the rise of intelligent life, the conscious struggle for power, and the development of advanced technology; and seeing how technology is now changing evolution from a natural process into a consciously controlled process; and seeing consciousness as an abstract force of nature that deepens as it accumulates information; the evidence begins to support the possibility of a cosmic plan.

Only by identifying a cosmic plan will we ever be able to provide a satisfying explanation for what is happening in the world right now, and what might be happening in the near future. Only if consciousness has a universal purpose can human life truly be said to have universal value, and only then can we derive a rational and believable alternative to traditional religion; an alternative in which the concept of God is associated with healthy progressive values rather than ignorant conservative ones.

In a similar way to how the church once held a monopoly on knowledge, in the modern world, the universities stake their reputation on teaching as much of the truth as has yet been discovered.

Modern society places great trust in the universities to teach us the truth, and not to teach us any myths or other mistaken ideas. But as long as the only truth taught by the universities is that we are living a meaningless life in a purposeless multiverse then they can forget about ever playing the leading role in shaping the future of people's beliefs.

Until the universities begin to popularize an authoritative and compelling theory of existence in which God and natural evolution work seamlessly together, then the traditional religions will continue to be the only significant institutions which preach that humans have both universal purpose and universal value.

It is now too dangerously close to the time when technologies of mass destruction begin to proliferate into the hands of religious fanatics who have spent their entire lives praying for the coming of the Day of Judgment. The time has finally arrived for the universities to take responsibility for what people believe by offering a convincing and widely agreeable alternative to traditional religion, before the nations descend into religiously inspired nuclear terrorism and war.

Your choice

It was mentioned at the start of this book, that when it comes to explaining our existence, once all of the myths and misconceptions have been stripped away, there remains only two possibilities.

One possibility is that there is some kind of purposeful creative process that designed the universe and planned the events that led to the evolution of intelligent life. If this is true, then we have a reason and a duty to survive and to progress, to play our part in the grand cosmic scheme. We could have faith that continued technological advancement will lead to social, economic, and moral progress. And we could have hope that humanity can survive by choosing to be thoughtful and cooperative.

The other possibility is that there is no God, no plan, no purpose, life is meaningless, consciousness has no special value, and so human life has no special value either. Our only reason for continuing to struggle through life would be to pursue our instinctual needs and desires, and our only reason for continuing this social and economic progress would be to increase our material wealth and level of luxury. Other than friendly affections or noble ideals, our only justifiable reason for caring about each other would be for the anticipation of some mutual benefit. Without any cosmic purpose worth making personal sacrifices for, this universe will never be anything more than a cosmic battlefield for evolutionary competition and the conscious struggle for power.

These are the only two possibilities. Other writers might claim that there are other possibilities, but if you look closely enough at their explanations, you always find flaws. Their arguments will either be unscientific or be based around some hollow form of reasoning.

In any case, it is up to you to decide which of the two you want to believe. Believing in either possibility requires having faith in some unproven assumption. The only understanding that requires no leap of faith, and so therefore the only understanding in which we can be totally confident, is to keep our minds open to both possibilities.

For more information about human consciousness, please visit ...

[The Journal of Evolutionary Philosophy](#)

Shattering the Sacred Myths - Chapter 15

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Politics and Religion

Explores the relationship between politics and religion leading up to the rise of the religious right in America and the emergence of political Islam.

After the collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War, many people believed that the long centuries of global conflict were finally over. Dictatorships began falling like dominoes and it seemed like democracy would spread rapidly around the globe, giving rise to a new world order based upon freedom, market economics, and peace. Even the United States cut back on military spending and began closing its overseas bases.

Apart from the Iranian revolution, few Western commentators cared about the growing popularity of radical Islam throughout Asia and the Middle East. Most Westerners had become desensitized to the ongoing conflicts in Palestine, Kashmir, Bosnia, and Chechnya. The victory of the Taliban, which brought peace to Afghanistan, was seen as a welcome curiosity. The Western world was ignoring the growing hatred that many Muslims were feeling towards what was perceived to be a continuation of Christian and Jewish imperialism.

The resurgence of Christianity in the United States and the return of family values were applauded by most conservative commentators. Christianity enjoyed the respect of being one of the historical foundations of Western culture, and apart from dividing the community over issues like abortion and homosexuality, religious faith seemed like a reassuring alternative to the postmodern uncertainty of relativism and skepticism.

Religious hostility was mostly confined to a few troubled regions where people with differing religious faiths shared the same area of land. Religious differences often fueled bitter power struggles for political control of the land, which occasionally erupted into violence and bloodshed.

With the collapse of communism, the market economy finally won the worldwide right to decide the distribution of wealth. But with technological advancement and the convergence of regional cultures into a single worldwide television and Internet culture, it suddenly became apparent that as well as the global competition for resources and the uneven distribution of material wealth, there was one more major unsolved source of global hostility.

The clash of civilizations

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 were a rude awakening for the Western world. It suddenly seemed like the conflict between capitalism and communism had only delayed a more serious and potentially devastating three-way battle between Christian beliefs, Islamic beliefs, and secular democratic materialism, with each region of the world having its own cultural investments to protect.

A fierce debate is now raging between Christians, Muslims, and secular intellectuals in the world media and on the Internet. And if the American invasion of Iraq has taught us anything, it is that we must expect the political and religious tensions to continue to rise over the coming decades, with increased military spending, an escalation in global conflict, and the possibility of nuclear terrorism.

While many observers have strong feelings about the current world crisis, there seems to be very little agreement about why it is happening or what should be done about it. Corporate media commentators only seem to focus on personality politics and other contemporary aspects of the conflict. Most Western commentators are merely mouthpieces for either the secular left or religious right, from where they earn their living by helping to fan the flames of hostility. The opinions of politicians are driven mostly by vested interests, and the universities are too gripped by political correctness to provide any authoritative analysis or practical solutions.

It could be argued that in order to properly understand the situation, you first need to be aware of the long-term patterns that underlie the history of human beliefs. But it is surprising how little the average person knows or even cares about how Christianity and Islam were ever able to rise to dominate the mass consciousness in the first place. Few secular thinkers seem to be able to make sense out of Christianity or Islam, and most believers are too mesmerized by their own beliefs to know what is real and what is not. Nobody has yet been able to deconstruct the myths in a convincing way, and very few have been brave enough to try.

Shattering the sacred myths

This book began with a simple, easy to read, step-by-step explanation of how humans evolved from self-replicating organic molecules through random mutation and natural selection. It then hinted that

the evolutionary process may be transforming into something new as the race for military superiority and higher profits drives the ongoing discovery of more advanced technologies. It reflected on whether the inevitable change from natural evolution to 'consciously controlled evolution' through genetic engineering and artificial intelligence could suggest some kind of mysterious cosmic plan underlying the evolution of intelligent life. And it suggested that questioning the possibility of a purpose behind natural evolution is the only meaningful way to debate the existence of God.

After having established a strictly rational and yet metaphysically open-minded context, this book then proceeded to methodically deconstruct three thousand years of popular belief, focusing primarily on Judaism, Greek philosophy, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. The underlying theme of the book has been that these religions and moral philosophies arose over the centuries not only as explanations for our earthly existence, but also as strategies for regulating the distribution of political power.

The rise of Christianity

Our interpretation of the history of ideas and beliefs began around three thousand years ago, when the Jewish priesthood took advantage of the newly discovered power of alphabetic writing to craft a detailed mythology about a single God of creation. Using myths about miracles, the priests succeeded in uniting their population under a single belief and giving them a practical set of laws and values. Guided by their communal faith, the Jewish people themselves became the lawkeepers, and under the watchful eye of a powerful priesthood, kings were held accountable to the same standards as commoners.

Greek storytellers also adopted alphabetic writing, but they were unable to make their traditional myths about a family of selfish gods sound convincing, and interaction between the gods was often unfriendly, and so Greek religious morality was largely ineffective. The Greek economy depended heavily on slave labor, and peace between the Greek cities was only ever achieved through domination by military force. But the advantage of having a failed religion was that without any powerful priesthood to stifle free inquiry, Greek thinkers were free to pursue science and philosophy.

While most Greeks continued to follow their traditional religions and other popular forms of superstition, philosophers like Plato tried to find a more rational way of convincing people to care as much about their community as they did about themselves. But despite the development of many profound philosophical insights over the centuries, at the end of the day, the only popular alternative to blind religious faith seemed to be the skeptical rejection of any universal truths or values.

The failure of Greek philosophy to establish a widely acceptable metaphysical worldview and system of cooperative morality would eventually prove to be disastrous. The Romans inherited this failure from the Greeks, and so the Roman Empire was ruled mostly through terror and corruption. Under the command of self-serving generals, Rome's armies raped and pillaged the entire region, occasionally exterminating entire populations. Slavery was unquestioned and people were slaughtered for the entertainment of bloodthirsty crowds.

While the Romans were using force to establish their authority over the Jews, one Jewish sect was developing a new collection of religious scriptures. Based upon the successful foundations of the old Jewish mythology, but also incorporating new lessons gained from recent centuries of moral philosophy, the cult of Jesus established a believable myth about God having appeared on earth in the form of a man to teach people right from wrong.

Congregations soon began appearing all over the empire as the story of Jesus aroused the admiration and satisfied the hopes of a growing number of believers. Christianity was particularly popular among the poor and oppressed because it preached that everyone was equal in the eyes of God, and it gave people hope for happiness after death.

As Christianity spread, it became a popular political movement, united in its opposition to many of the unnecessarily cruel and vulgar aspects of Roman tradition. A civil war around the year 306 allowed Christian forces to gain control of the empire. Shortly afterwards, the empire lost its aggressive sense of self-preservation and began to crumble, but Christianity continued to spread, eventually uniting all of Europe under a Christian understanding of existence.

Unfortunately, by building one set of myths upon another, the price paid by the Christians for their peaceful and forgiving morality was that Christian ideas about history and human nature had almost nothing in common with reality. Greek science and philosophy were soon denounced as heresy. Rational thinkers were persecuted and their libraries of knowledge were burned, plunging the entire region into a dark age that lasted for the next thousand years.

The rise of Islam

Arab tribes were still fighting each other for limited desert resources as Christianity spread into the Arabian Peninsula. Christianity's success at unifying the masses under a common metaphysical worldview and system of cooperative morality inspired Muhammad to unite the Arab tribes under his own interpretation of Christianity.

However, while Christianity preached peace and forgiveness, Muhammad's new religion embraced war as justifiable means of spreading Arab language, law and culture. The Islamic Empire grew rapidly, and united under Islam, the Arabs, Persians and Turks became enormously powerful. But as copies of the Koran multiplied and Islamic law grew more rigid, the Muslim world gradually slipped into its own dark age, as books containing blasphemous ideas were burned and freethinkers were either persecuted or killed.

Filling the moral void

People's ideas about right and wrong generally reflect their own selfish interests or the interests of the group they belong to. Groups with conflicting interests often have different ideas about right and wrong, and these differences can escalate into power struggles. When the struggle for power is not restrained by laws or morals, then whichever group gains power will usually try to further its own interests at the expense of everyone else.

The powerless and oppressed can try to resist, but unless they can effectively threaten those in power, then resistance is futile. Those in power will usually try to get away with as much as they possibly can before resistance rises to a point where the costs start to outweigh the benefits. One thing that helps to lessen the severity of oppression is the fear that opposing power centers might gain popular support.

All of the major religions arose as alternative centers of power, using myths and other means to establish new ideas about right and wrong that encouraged greater self-restraint and cooperation between believers. Mystical books containing these ideas grew into sacred scriptures as the poor and oppressed became believers, often in the hope of safeguarding their interests against violent greed-driven powermongers. Royalty and other forms of dictatorship were forced to temper their abuse of power in order to compete with the priesthoods for the affections of the people.

However, whenever priests became powerful enough to silence dissent and stifle free enquiry, then they would do so in order to protect the myths that they used to uphold their moral laws and values.

Priesthood dictatorships like the medieval Catholic Church, the Islamic Empire, or the Chinese Confucian bureaucracy maintained their iron grip on power through both armed force and ideological conditioning. The only serious threats they faced were from heresy or foreign invasion, and heresy was easily suppressed by outlawing freedom of thought. Most of Europe and Asia has spent much of the last few thousand years lingering in the deep darkness of aggressive religious oppression.

The decline of Christianity

European intellectuals were never entirely comfortable with the Christian mythology, but very few of them were brave enough to speak out against it. Following the rediscovery of Greek philosophy and the invention of the printing press, Europe's population was exposed to an avalanche of books containing skeptical ideas, and heretics finally began to feel that it was safe to openly criticize the Church. As the iron grip of Christianity began to slip, vigorous new forms of science and philosophy struggled to emerge from the thick blanket of censorship.

Following the discovery of gunpowder and the invention of new navigational instruments for ocean-going vessels, a thousand years of relatively peaceful Christian unity fell apart as European warlords battled each other for the right to conquer the world and capture its resources. After the pope lost

control of northern Europe, state churches became mere instruments through which palaces could control popular thought.

The founders of the United States guaranteed their nation's aggressive competitiveness and freethinking spirit by keeping religious influences out of their democratic constitution. Old churches competed with new ones in America to fill the metaphysical and moral void. In the intense competition between the different sects for popularity and political favor, Christianity often became merely a moral pretense for powerful political interests, at times even becoming a convenient justification for racism, sexism, and slavery.

The industrial age

None of the ancient religions were equipped to deal with the rise of industrial capitalism. The Catholic Church declared the modern world to be evil as business leaders wrestled political control away from aristocrats and clergymen. Christian compassion was hardly compatible with capitalist values like competition and profit. Without any democratic rights to protect them, workers across Europe and Asia became factory slaves for an increasingly rich and powerful elite.

Although many capitalists were fiercely secular and opposed to any kind of moral system that tried to restrain them from fully exploiting the available resources, they still upheld traditional religion as a means of pacifying the poor. Meanwhile, many of the poor turned instead to socialist ideologies. Even working class Christians felt that the religious ideals of brotherly love, compassion, and equality had more in common with socialist politics than with conservative policies dedicated to preserving the power of the wealthy.

Communism gained an enormous following by promising to empower the poor through revolution. In many ways, it was just like another religion, attracting new followers by preaching myths about history and human nature. Devoted communists even resorted to terrorism, hoping to gain power by force in order to impose their political myths and economic morals upon everyone else.

The communists despised traditional religion, and when the growing popularity of communism threatened to eradicate Christianity from Europe, church leaders supported the rise of fascist dictators who vowed to crush the godless ideology. In South America and other parts of the world, church leaders fought the spread of communism by supporting right wing military dictatorships employing death squads.

The widespread fear of communism proved to be well founded. People living under communist dictatorships became brainwashed victims, and freethinkers were imprisoned and killed as a new mini dark age descended over parts of Europe and Asia.

The rise of secular philosophy

Christianity received a crippling blow in the late 1800s with the widespread acceptance of the theory of evolution. Skeptics could now easily dismiss the Bible as little more than a collection of ancient myths. Intellectuals abandoned Christianity, and scientists and philosophers were finally free to speculate unhindered.

New schools of philosophy began to flourish. Marx called for a working class revolution. Nietzsche predicted the end of baseless religious and philosophical moralizing. Utilitarians valued whatever made people happy. Existentialists celebrated the meaninglessness of life. Secular humanists tried to put a friendly face on godlessness. At the same time, idealistic thinkers of every conceivable flavor continued to argue that somewhere in nature there was a place for eternal and unquestionable human values.

But the most popular philosophies are often the ones that appeal to people's baser instincts rather than their higher intellect. Despite the claims of well-meaning secular moralists, the loss of faith in any universal truths or values made people more conscious of their own personal desires and less concerned about the suffering of others.

Nationalism, Fascism, and Nazism rose in fierce competition to communism. These ideologies also preached myths in order to promote values that promised to empower the impressionable masses. And they also used violence to silence their critics.

With Europe's ineffective state churches failing to provide any moral foundation for peace, without any other popular peace-loving morality to restrain the imperialistic ambitions of Europe's warlords, and with the development of modern weapons like machine guns, long distance artillery, battleships, submarines, tanks, poison gas, and combat aircraft, Europe's descent into self-destruction seemed inevitable.

The invention of the television produced another devastating blow for Christianity. As new ideas filled the minds of the young, Christianity lost its dominating influence over popular culture. At the same time, the availability of the birth control pill broke the connection between sex and pregnancy. Social and sexual revolution soon swept across the industrialized world.

While many Christians supported reforms like the formation of the United Nations, the establishment of human rights, and the end of institutionalized racism, the moral authority upon which Christianity rested was directly threatened by women's liberation, sexual freedom, and the legalization of homosexuality. Not only had their mythology been discredited, but now also their sexual morality had become redundant and was seen as unnecessarily oppressive and outdated. Although many people still called themselves Christians out of sentiment for tradition, real Christians were becoming an unpopular minority. The continued secularization of Europe and America now seemed almost unstoppable.

The failure of secular philosophy

The victory of secularism brought little comfort to the masses. Despite having all of the best academic talent in the world on their side, secular thinkers failed to offer people any easy-to-believe family-friendly explanation for why they exist, and they failed to agree on any convincing foundation for cooperative morality. Just like the skeptics in ancient Greece, they failed to provide any satisfactory alternative to traditional religion to which the increasingly confused masses could be easily migrated.

Instead, as the Western world celebrated its newfound freedom from religious morality, popular culture became a slave to market forces and rapidly descended to the lowest common denominator, often becoming a dismal reflection of human greed, ego, and perversity. 'Living for sex' became a popular lifestyle choice alongside militant superficiality and new age extraterrestrial mysticism. 'Greed is good' became the dominant political ideology. Even in the universities, scientific reasoning was abandoned in favor of academic neomarxism, postmodern relativism, and political correctness.

While most people just plod along and follow the herd without ever questioning their existence, the truth is that if we have no cosmic purpose then our lives have no real meaning or value. If there is no universal foundation for unconditional cooperation or personal self-sacrifice, then there is no reason to restrain ourselves from taking advantage of any opportunity to enrich and indulge ourselves regardless of the cost to powerless strangers. But most people are too sensitive to believe such mercenary talk, and so they will look for any alternative to fill the metaphysical and moral void.

The rise of the religious right

In the modern democratic world, various ideologies, each with their own ideas about right and wrong, compete for believers and a share of political power. People are generally attracted to whatever ideology best protects their personal interests, and in the democratic political power struggle, they vote for the party that best represents that ideology.

No ideology can please the majority of people, and under democracy, political movements with common interests are forced to compromise with each other in order to gain a share of political power. The laws they pass may not please everyone, but they usually keep enough people happy to keep the ruling coalition in power.

Historical declarations and political manifestos pronouncing universal rights and wrongs, and holy books declaring eternal morals and values can be very effective propaganda tools in the political power struggle. They condition their readers with persuasive moral rhetoric, enflaming their passions and strengthening their resolve to gain power and impose their ideas about right and wrong upon everyone else.

The modern industrialized world has plenty of distractions and not many intelligent educated people are interested in traditional religion anymore. But in traditionally Christian countries like the United States, a significant number of people still believe that every word of the Bible is literally true.

Without any intellectual credibility, and with their moral authority reduced to vilifying homosexuals and picketing abortion clinics, these people have finally dropped any pretense of political neutrality, and in order to preserve their beliefs, they have joined their old capitalist allies on the political right. Together they form coalitions of social and economic conservatives.

Not too many hardcore capitalists even believe in God, but they welcome the fundamentalist voting block as a way of allowing them to tailor their economic policies less towards the interests of the upper middle class and more towards the interests of a smaller and wealthier elite. Abortion and homosexuality are easy issues to exploit for the sake of extra votes.

The Christian fundamentalists have just as much to gain from sharing power with the economic conservatives. They benefit from the scaling back of government schools and welfare programs in favor of church run schools and church based charities. Not only can they indoctrinate more children, they can also convert more of the poor who become dependent on their handouts.

One thing that the Christians and economic conservatives have in common is their hatred for what they perceive to be rampant forms of social degeneracy that they blame on the aggressive liberalism of recent decades. They see traditional religious values as the most potent cultural force for combating teenage pregnancy, the breakdown of family relationships, the spread of sexual diseases, drug and alcohol abuse, street gangs, gun violence, and popular forms of entertainment that encourage these types of behavior.

The rise of radical Islam

Centuries ago, when Muslim clerics saw the effect that the printing press was having in Europe, it was banned in Muslim lands in order to hold back the inevitable tide of heretical ideas. This not only helped to preserve the dominance of Islam, it also condemned the Muslim world to cultural and economic stagnation.

Over a period of time leading up to the end of the First World War, the Islamic Empire was conquered by the European powers and carved up into manageable states. Most of the military strongmen who rose to power in the region were keen to modernize their economies and societies by removing Islamic influences from the law. Although many people remained deeply religious, religion was reduced to being a private matter for each individual.

After the discovery of oil in the region, and as oil became a vital strategic resource for the industrialized world, the Western powers formed alliances with regional kings and dictators in order to secure cheap reliable oil supplies. While the dictators and their friends and families became oil billionaires, the lack of any economic accountability and the repression of all political opposition condemned the growing population of the region to unemployment, poverty, and hopelessness.

With the dictators having nothing to gain and everything to lose from democratic reform, and with the Western powers seemingly opposed to democracy in the region for fear of destabilizing their allies, radical Islam came to be seen by many as the only viable political opposition force; fiercely opposed to both political corruption and Western imperialism, well funded by the religious establishment, and actively concerned for the welfare of even the poorest sections of the community.

After the Islamic revolution in Iran, regional dictators began to introduce Islamic laws and other reforms in order to appease their increasingly influential fundamentalist critics. The resurgence of Islam has actually strengthened many dictators, who have been able to manipulate religious sentiment to deflect public anger away from themselves by fueling popular hatred towards America and Israel.

The remnants of the old Islamic Empire are trapped in a vicious cycle of dictatorship, Western imperialism, Islamic fundamentalism, and religious intolerance. Unless the kings and dictators can be persuaded to introduce democratic reforms, then they will inevitably face popular uprisings, military coups, and foreign invasions that will more than likely just prolong the calamity.

Religious reform

Few people realize the seriousness of the current world crisis. The traditional religions are floundering and failing while academic philosophy remains paralyzed by reactionary skepticism and superficial political idealism. Entire populations are being blindly led by thoughtless materialistic forces while the followers of traditional religion are becoming increasingly aggressive in their fight to preserve ancient religious superstitions. The general level of ignorance across the entire population concerning issues relating to our existence is overwhelming.

Christian fundamentalists know that the future of the Christian mythology depends on discrediting the theory of natural evolution. However, by attempting to discredit evolution, the fundamentalists have only succeeded in radicalizing a new generation of pro-evolutionary scientists. And by joining the economic conservatives to become a mainstream political force, the religious right have unwittingly turned their religion into a legitimate target for political attack. The more politically active that Christianity becomes, the more it will provoke a powerful tide of anti-Christian sentiment among liberal minded people.

For a growing number of people, the Bible and the Koran have completely lost their sacred appeal and have become hated symbols of ignorance and oppression. For thousands of years, these books have survived by threatening those who criticize them. But with the uncensored freedom of speech that now exists on the Internet, no realistic threat can stop the scathing condemnation that both religions now receive on countless Internet websites. The Koran in particular is now facing widespread criticism, seen by many as an excuse, if not a motivation, for authoritarianism and terror. According to popular Internet opinion, Islam has lost its legitimacy as any kind of moral foundation upon which to base a modern civilization.

Technological advancements are often followed by social changes, and since the beginning of the technological age, we have witnessed a gradual decline in institutionalized ignorance and oppression. Religious leaders may not realize it yet, but they are no longer free to brainwash the masses without facing fierce intellectual resistance. The fear and censorship that once protected them is now gone, and because of the dangers posed by religious extremism in an age of devastating new technologies, the reevaluation of religious beliefs is now imperative.

The ultimate ideological showdown has finally begun, and if this book is any indication of things to come, we are going to see a noticeable transformation in popular thought, as more people become exposed to new ideas about the history of religion, and as mainstream media commentators become more confident about criticizing religion without fear.

Shattering the Sacred Myths - Chapter 16

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Replacing Religion with Science

Looks at the failures of Christianity and considers the issues that need to be addressed before religion can be replaced by the scientific worldview.

The rise of Christianity

Around the year 306, the Roman Empire was plunged into civil war as a handful of military commanders battled for the imperial throne. One of the contenders, Constantine, was sympathetic to the Christian cause, and after winning a number of key battles, his forces gained control of Rome. Within a few years, the Christian bishops had agreed on what scriptures to include in their holy book, and the Church had begun taking over the institutions of imperial power.

All of the values upon which the empire was built were overturned by the rise to power of the Church. In the decades that followed, science and philosophy were banned and replaced by delusions of heaven and hell, and ideas about justice in this world were replaced by hope for a heavenly reward in

the next world. Within a few generations, the empire had lost its aggressive sense of self-preservation and had begun to collapse under the weight of invading hordes.

As Christianity continued to spread throughout Europe, religious fanatics worked to destroy anything that might cast doubt on the Christian mythology. Books were burned, knowledge was lost, and freethinkers were persecuted and killed, plunging the entire region into a dark age that lasted for more than a thousand years.

The decline of Christianity

Many freethinking people despised Christianity during the dark ages. They knew that the Bible was just an improvised collection of mediocre myths, but because the Church had so much power, very few people were brave enough to speak out openly against it. Only in the late 1700s and early 1800s, with the emergence of political freedom and the discoveries of modern science did freethinkers start to openly criticize the Christian myth.

By the end of the 1800s, the theory of evolution had gained widespread acceptance and most Western intellectuals abandoned Christianity. But despite having lost all of their intellectual credibility, the churches maintained a strong following, particularly among those who were not educated in science. Many faithful Christians became so frightened of scientific discovery and social change that they became politically active, attempting to regain power in order to turn back the tide of progress.

The popularity of communism in the early 1900s was an even more serious threat to Christianity than science. The communists hated Christianity and vowed to eradicate it from Europe. Church leaders responded by forming alliances with anti-communist political parties like the fascists and nazis. This was not surprising, as the Church had always been opposed to freedom of speech, freedom of thought, and democracy.

Christianity thrived in America in the 1950s and early 60s thanks to Cold War paranoia. Anyone who criticized Christianity was immediately branded a communist. People were pressured into thinking that it was unpatriotic not to attend church. Conservatives grasped this golden opportunity to slip God into the pledge of allegiance and onto the paper currency.

The Great Social Revolution

By the end of the 1960s, television, pop music, and the birth control pill were inspiring a revolution in Western culture. Social activists demanded women's rights, sexual freedom, and gay liberation. Conservative Christians fought bitterly against these social changes, but the old religious morality was soon condemned by the mass media as unhealthy and oppressive.

As conservative Christians became an unpopular minority, mainstream churches adapted by becoming less sexist and homophobic. But the interpretation of religious scripture can only be stretched so far before people begin losing faith and start looking for new beliefs. Many abandoned Christianity in favor of new-age mysticism. Others simply became non-aligned free-thinking materialists.

By the late 1980s and 90s, in cities across the Western world, most people only went to church to attend weddings and funerals. Enthusiastic church-going Christians were assumed to be ignorant. At the same time, being openly anti-Christian was not popular either. Like a bad memory, people just did not want to think or talk about religion.

Meanwhile, conservative church leaders harvested money from believers, built financial empires, and established media networks. By promising health, wealth, and happiness, they managed to convert many of those who had been left behind by the modern world. They schemed, hijacked political parties, and quietly waited for a chance to regain power.

Being anti-Christian

Fortunately, there is very little reason to worry about attempts by fanatical Christians to retake power. It is easy to be fooled by talk of a religious revival, but the fact that Christianity needs to be revived is just another sign that it is a dying religion. The truth is that Christianity has never been so weak or vulnerable.

With Christian fundamentalists and Islamic extremists waging a holy war against modern democratic values, traditional religion has never had so many enemies. University professors are starting to openly attack it, and the hardworking masses are starting to question what it is worth.

Thanks to the uncensored freedom of speech only made possible by the Internet, there is a growing chorus of resentment towards religion, and scathing criticisms are starting to echo into the mass media. For the first time in more than 1500 years, it is finally becoming socially acceptable to be openly anti-Christian.

Relic from an age of ignorance

Most of those who are opposed to Christianity think that it is just a relic from an age of ignorance, and they cannot understand why it has not yet been abandoned and consigned to the dustbin of history. But Christianity is more than just a relic.

The reason why it continues to attract followers is because it offers the unthinking masses an easy-to-believe family-friendly explanation for why they exist, and it encourages believers to think of themselves as a caring sharing community rather than as separate selfish individuals.

You might think that society can function perfectly well without some fairy-tale explanation of existence being used to uphold some contrived system of social values. And you might be right. But it might also be true that Christianity will continue to thrive until something better comes along to replace it. And in order to understand why Western society seems to be so hesitant to abandon Christianity, you first need to examine the emerging alternative.

The scientific worldview

History has clearly shown that the only reliable source of knowledge about our existence is the path of scientific discovery. And according to the authoritative scientific worldview, our entire universe operates like a mindless law-abiding machine. Every particle of matter and wave of energy is constrained to follow the laws of nature, and these laws can never be broken.

So, where did this mindless law-abiding machine come from? Without any evidence, this is where science gives way to speculation, but according to popular scientific opinion, our universe is just one of an infinite number of randomly configured universes called the 'multiverse'. The multiverse itself is thought to be a mindless law-abiding machine that has either existed forever for no reason, or else it unexpectedly exploded into existence like a bubble of order in a sea of chaos. The exact details are still being argued over by cosmologists, but the general idea is that the ultimate source of all reality is a mindless meaningless sea of chaos.

Natural evolution

According to the scientific worldview, human beings evolved into existence through an endless series of random mutations and natural selections. Life began billions of years ago when a complex organic molecule unexpectedly replicated itself, and then as the unbroken chain of generations mutated, and variations that were better adapted to their environment survived, the evolutionary process eventually led to the rise of intelligent life.

In the opinion of most evolutionary biologists, the randomness of the mutations proves that the appearance of intelligent life was purely an accident of nature. This means that human beings are like self-preserving self-replicating biological machines. Our existence has no purpose and our lives have no meaning other than whatever meaning we invent for ourselves, and yet we are compelled to struggle onwards by vain dreams and biological desires, and we are almost all completely immersed in the illusion of our contemporary social drama.

No foundation for morality

The meaninglessness of life might sound depressing, and many people will refuse to believe that their lives have no cosmic significance, but an even more depressing outcome of the scientific worldview is that, other than feelings of affection or the possibility of some mutual benefit, we have no provable cosmic reason to care about each other. And other than the fear of punishment or rejection, or the perception of personal gain, there is no reason to follow the rules and values of society. Despite any

idealistic claims, the scientific worldview supports no philosophical justification for unconditional cooperation or personal self-sacrifice.

Most traditional religions preach that God gave the world unquestionable rules and values about right and wrong that were written down long ago in holy books. After centuries of struggling to overcome this oppressive idea, many institutions now teach that there is a natural foundation for universal human rights and values, and that we are discovering these rights and values through the historic struggle for freedom and the power of human reason.

In recent times, however, a more sophisticated understanding has been developing as scientifically minded thinkers come to terms with the full philosophical implications of the theory of evolution. According to this new understanding, the only reliable truths in this universe are the laws of nature that govern matter and energy, and these laws cannot be used to substantiate any universal human values.

If our lives are merely the product of complex interactions between atoms and molecules, then any attempt to make judgments about human behavior would be the same as saying "this chemical reaction is good, and this one is bad". You might want to believe that if you added up all the molecular interactions and calculated the most successful way to live, the result would be something like "love thy neighbor". But without ever being able to perform this calculation, we cannot be sure that the result would not be "screw thy neighbor". In any case, the real result is probably a mixture of the two, because both describe how people actually behave.

The power struggle

In the scientific worldview, ideas about morals and values are purely the product of human thinking. People learn many of their ideas about right and wrong from the traditions of their society, and these ideas continue to be shaped throughout people's lives by their personal interests and the interests of those they care about.

The problem with this, is that groups with competing interests often have different ideas about right and wrong, and these differences can easily escalate into power struggles. Since the earliest days of human society, groups with differing ideas about right and wrong have competed for the political power to impose their interests and values upon everyone else.

The struggle for political power has historically been played out using violence and oppression. Those in command of the greatest physical force have had the power to decree right and wrong, and those who disagreed were silenced. It was during these times that religions like Christianity gained popularity by using myths about miracles to convince people to believe in eternal and universal ideas about right and wrong that were intended to permanently protect the interests of the wider community.

In recent centuries, kings and dictators have been overthrown and replaced by democratic governments, and science and technology have undermined religious morality. Now thanks to the historic struggle for political freedom, people living in modern democracies each have a small share of political power. In the democratic political power struggle, physical force has been replaced by the gentle art of persuasion. Various powerful interests now compete for popularity in the commercial mass media. For better or for worse, media brainwashing and majority opinion now decide right and wrong. While religious morality still influences believers, it only influences the rest of us inasmuch as religious leaders compete with other interest groups to sway the opinions of voters.

The secular humanist tradition

Although the mindless cosmic machine has no provision for universal human values, most people in the modern world, including most scientific thinkers, still believe that some things are universally and eternally right or wrong. Some examples of how these values make it into the common consciousness are ...

- Throughout history, storytelling idealists have used romance and poetry in an effort to persuade their audience to believe in some kind of greater good that is worth struggling for.

- The Western philosophical tradition, from Plato to Sartre, has been like a never-ending attempt to outwit the scientific worldview and prove that some universal human values really do exist.
- After the human rights revolution in the 1960s and 70s, many people now believe that any form of discrimination or oppression is universally wrong.
- University social scientists often use distorted interpretations of history and human nature in order to justify their humanist ideals.

Left wing political activists (those who fight for the poor and powerless) are generally opposed to the idea that right and wrong arise purely out of power struggles, because if this were true, then left wing political ideals would have no real moral superiority. The left could be accused of being just as selfish as the right, and their ideals could be dismissed as nothing more than political propaganda.

Classic literature, Western philosophy, political idealism, and even social science all contribute to a secular humanist tradition, which is like a godless religion dedicated to convincing people to believe that even in a cold heartless mechanical universe, they should think of themselves as a caring sharing community rather than as separate selfish individuals. And like religious fanatics who cannot understand why freethinkers reject their faith, many idealists cannot understand why some people do not share their ideas about right and wrong.

The religious right

Right wing political groups (the side of the rich and powerful) have no ideals other than their ambition to pursue wealth and power. They oppose left wing political ideals because they loathe any kind of humanist value that tries to prevent them from fully exploiting the profit potential of every available resource.

Popular myths can create opportunities for people in power to exploit believers. As masters in the art of the power struggle, without any misguided idealism to restrain them, those on the political right, who would do anything for power, have no problem upholding religious myths as a means of keeping the working masses complacent and obedient.

Being ideologically opposed to unconditional cooperation or personal self-sacrifice, the political right needs religion in order to give it the appearance of having morals. And the churches need the political right to protect them from the left, whose secular humanist tradition acts like an alternative religion, competing to control the moral sentiment of the masses. Through their ownership of the corporate media, right wing political propagandists try to convince people that the churches are morally superior to the humanists.

Conservative voters

When old folks see kids on the street these days with wild looks and bad attitudes, they know that many of these kids live only for the thrill of partying all night, getting drunk and stoned, and having sex. They know that many young people don't care about their future because they think that life is meaningless, and they don't care about the future of the world because they think that we are all screwed anyway.

And this is one of the reasons why many older people go to church and vote for the religious right, because they hate the idea of having slaved and sacrificed their entire lives just to leave everything in the hands of a delinquent generation.

In the absence of any effective secular alternative, they still see religion as the most potent cultural force for regulating the thoughts and behavior of young people. The most vocal advocates of traditional religion have always been older generations who are worried about their families, and who feel threatened by their neighbor's kids.

Breaking down the percentages

Opinion polls suggest that around one quarter of all Americans still believe that every word of the Bible is literally true. Many of these people have never read any other book than the Bible. If they

were not reading the Bible then they would be reading some other book of ancient myths. It could be worse, they could be reading the Koran.

Another fifty percent of the population still call themselves Christians out of sentiment for tradition and in the absence of any popular alternative. Many of these people have never even read the Bible, and many are looking for something better to believe in, but at the end of the day, they mostly believe whatever they are told by their televisions, because it is safer just to follow the herd.

The remainder are non-Christians. Among them are freethinkers, political idealists, and skeptics who disbelieve everything. Less than ten percent of the population have a good understanding of the scientific worldview.

Replacing Christianity

The obvious replacement for Christianity is the scientific worldview. Unfortunately, the interpretation of science now being offered to the masses seems to be too difficult for them to understand and too hostile for them to accept. Many scientific thinkers blame this on the ignorance of the masses, but it is probably just as much the fault of the arrogance of the scientists.

The scientific worldview will not replace religion unless it can satisfy the following requirements ...

- It needs to be easy to understand and easy to believe.
- In order to attract the loyalty of the masses, it needs to be interpreted in such a way as to advance the interests of the poor and powerless while not making enemies of the rich and powerful.
- It needs to reassure older people that the minds of their young will not be corrupted by despair about meaninglessness or the abandonment of moral restraint.
- It needs to be acceptable to everyone, regardless of why they believe the universe exists. The question of why the universe exists is beyond the limits of science and is open to speculation. Some people will want to believe that the reason for our existence is orderly and purposeful, others will want to believe that it is mindless and chaotic.

If the scientific worldview could be interpreted in such a way as to satisfy these emotional needs, then it might be possible to convert large numbers of liberal Christians. If that happened, then many liberal Muslims, who are even more desperate for an alternative belief, might follow. Eventually the entire world might be united by a common belief in the scientific worldview.

Shattering the Sacred Myths - Chapter 17

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Evolutionary Metaphysics

Discusses extending the theory of evolution to include the struggle for political power and the development of advanced technology.

Most people who believe in God also believe that their ancient religious scriptures are evidence for the existence of God. They pray for miracles to help them through life and they hope for a heavenly reward after death. Their faith may give them comfort, but unless they are prepared to question the beliefs that were passed down to them by tradition, then they will never have anything meaningful to contribute to a philosophical debate about God's existence.

The problem with trying to debate the existence of God is that the word 'God' means so many different things to different people. God is described by the various religions as being anything from an interventionist judge to an incomprehensible observer. Traditional religious myths have 'him' doing everything from angrily flooding the world in order to punish the sinners, to walking around in the form of a man, preaching love and forgiveness.

Until only recently, it was dangerous to openly debate the existence of God. Even today, in some parts of the world, religious leaders still condition their followers to react violently whenever their teachings are questioned. However, with the total freedom of expression now made possible by the Internet, with the ideological battle heating up between traditional religious morality and modern democratic freedom, and with potential nuclear conflicts brewing around the world between the followers of different faiths, it seems like the inevitable showdown over the existence of God has finally begun.

For thousands of years, the traditional religions have undoubtedly played an important role in promoting social justice and preserving community and family values. But now the moral dictates of ancient religious scriptures often cause more problems than they solve. Religious opposition to birth control has condemned much of the developing world to overpopulation and poverty, and strict religious morality still forces many women to remain uneducated, live in fear, and cover their faces in public.

The traditional religions are now so heavily associated with ignorance, superstition, and oppression, and they have such a long history of being opposed to science and democracy that it seems like a miracle that any educated person can still believe in them. It is not surprising that many people living in free democratic societies today reject the idea of God, when the only God they are familiar with is so burdened by conflicting myths, oppressive morals, and hateful prejudices.

A question of purpose

One way to debate the existence of God without causing confusion or provoking anger is not to mention the word 'God' at all. The question can instead be phrased ... whether or not there is any purpose behind the existence of the universe or any intention behind the evolution of intelligent life.

There is more than enough evidence to safely assume that human beings evolved from self-replicating organic molecules through the process of random mutation and natural selection. However, despite the passionate claims of both theists and atheists, we simply do not have enough evidence to conclude whether or not our collective consciousness is progressing towards greater awareness in order to fulfill some kind of higher purpose.

Although it is possible that the entire cosmos is just a mindless cosmic machine that has either existed forever for no reason or else somehow sprang into existence like an island of order in a sea of chaos, it is also possible that the formation of this universe, the evolution of life, and the rise of consciousness happened in accordance with some kind of purposeful creative process.

Religious ideologies

One of the more compelling reasons why some people hope for the existence of a purposeful creative process is because it can give a sense of meaning to their lives. Believing in a purposeful process is like having faith that our existence is orderly and meaningful, whereas to reject the possibility of purpose is like resigning yourself to the notion that our existence is ultimately meaningless, mindless, and possibly chaotic.

The idea that consciousness has some kind of higher purpose has always been popular because it offers people a more meaningful reason to live other than to simply pursue their selfish needs and desires. Believing in a higher purpose can motivate people to sacrifice their selfish desires and unite their efforts to carry out whatever they believe to be their common cosmic purpose.

Without any higher purpose, there would be no ultimate justification for unconditional cooperation or personal self-sacrifice. Our only arguable reason for caring about each other, other than feelings of affection or sympathy, would be for the anticipation of some mutual benefit. As long as we continued to enjoy advantages, and as long as we perceived no future disadvantage, we would have no reason not to indulge ourselves at the expense of powerless strangers. This entire universe would never be anything more than a cosmic battlefield for evolutionary competition and the conscious struggle for power. As evil as this sounds, it describes exactly how much of the world has always behaved.

Faced with the choice between a selfish meaningfulness struggle and unification through common purpose, throughout history, priests, prophets, and moral philosophers have used every technique in the art of religious persuasion to convince people to believe that human consciousness does have

some kind of cosmic purpose. Without any evidence to prove it, the most common strategy has been to craft myths in order to uphold the kinds of moral values that bring strangers together to work selflessly for the pursuit of some perceived common cause.

The possibility that consciousness might have a higher purpose has created an opportunity around which myths and morals have been able to evolve, usually introduced at revolutionary times by charismatic thinkers who were able to attract enthusiastic followings, and then perpetuated by priesthoods who continued to reinvent these myths and morals in ways that accommodated the prevailing cultural conditions. Unfortunately, the formation of religious myths and morals has also created opportunities for political extremists to manipulate believers, often in ways that continue to threaten peace and prosperity.

Secular ideologies

In recent centuries, as religious myths have been dispelled by scientific discoveries, secular political idealists have used distorted interpretations of history and human nature in order to establish collective moral frameworks like socialism and humanism. These ideals grew in opposition to the predictable greed-driven opportunism that always aspires to manipulate and enslave the masses. Without modern political idealism, pure greed and ambition might continue to provoke wars for profit, and the global political power struggle could eventually escalate into a nuclear apocalypse.

However, no secular moral ideology can justifiably claim that in a meaningless universe we still have an unselfish obligation to make personal sacrifices for the sake of others.

Secular Humanism, for example, is only really a recognition of the selfish notion that by generally helping others we generally help ourselves. The only solid foundation for humanist principles is that they have been learned through the lessons of history. But there is no authoritative guideline for what these principles are, other than collective perceptions, and the interpretation of history will always be a battleground for political debate.

Secular socialist ideologies like Marxism might have succeeded in rallying the poor and oppressed to unite in their struggle for a greater share of power, but if life is ultimately meaningless, then why should the rest of society sacrifice its own economic advantages and opportunities to help the poor and oppressed? In any case, the Marxist economic model, its ideas about human nature, and its socially engineered utopian dream were all myths invented as propaganda to recruit more misguided idealists to join the socialist cause.

Unfortunately, the most common political strategy used throughout history to unite people behind a common cause and convince them to make sacrifices, sometimes even sacrificing their lives, has been to demonize whoever might be conveniently perceived to be a common enemy.

God of the gaps

A common argument against the existence of God is that gods only exist in the minds of believers because they offer a convenient explanation to fill the gaps in our knowledge about the universe. Before science, many people believed that the gods were responsible for natural events like thunder and lightning, but then as people gained more scientific knowledge, the unknowns that they attributed to the gods became fewer, until eventually, as some people now believe, there is nothing left in nature for a god to explain.

The flaw in this argument is that science might never be able to explain why the universe exists. And science might never be able to disprove the idea that the evolution of intelligent life had some kind of cosmic purpose. These 'higher mysteries' will probably always be open to speculation, and so no matter how much knowledge we acquire, there will probably always be a gap in our knowledge that can be filled by a religious explanation. And because of the sense of common purpose that religion can inspire, such explanations will probably always be dominant.

Judging by the continued popularity of religion around the world today, it is doubtful whether the majority of people would ever accept the idea that our world has no true purpose in nature. They will probably always want to believe that their lives have some kind of cosmic significance and that humankind has some special relationship to the forces that created the universe.

Without any rational explanation for our existence that gives people a sense of purpose and meaning, they will continue to follow the irrational teachings of their ancient religious scriptures, and they will continue to be manipulated by their traditional religious institutions. They will continue to reject the theory of evolution because their religious leaders will keep telling them that evolution is a godless philosophy, and they will continue to be doubtful of scientific explanations because atheist academics will keep telling them that life is essentially absurd and meaningless.

Due to the popular desire for cosmic purpose and the unarguable possibility that there might be one, religious explanations will probably always exist, and so religious persuasion will probably always have an enormous influence over the political power struggle. However, there is no good reason to continue to tolerate political and religious extremism. The opportunity now exists for us to dispel the kinds of myths that continue to create opportunities for extremists to manipulate believers.

Rather than complaining about the god of the gaps, we now have the knowledge and freedom to develop a purposeful progressive scientific philosophy to fill the gap and displace the traditional religious myths by leaving no uncertainties that can be exploited by conservative anti-science opportunists.

Politics and religion

In recent years, the progressive side of politics has been seriously disadvantaged because people with progressive political ideals are generally educated enough to reject religious myths. But because the reactionary rejection of traditional religion commonly leads to the rejection of all metaphysical considerations, most progressive political thinkers are unable to perceive the importance of the relationship between politics and metaphysics.

Metaphysical arguments can be powerful weapons in the arsenal of progressive political persuasion. Metaphysical concepts like 'purpose' and 'meaning' are much more suited to the progressive political agenda, as they help people to see themselves as members of a universal community whose goals transcend the selfish desires of any single individual's lifetime. Whereas purposelessness only really supports the conservative political agenda of encouraging short-term economic growth through greed and envy by convincing people to see themselves as separate selfish individuals competing for their own selfish interests.

In any case, when progressive political activists publicly dismiss the possibility of a purposeful creative process, they only really succeed in polarizing society into those who believe and those who do not, rather than those who care and those who do not. This not only gives the conservatives more votes, it also radicalizes believers, making them more fanatical, and so religion becomes more potentially dangerous, especially as the tensions between differing religious beliefs continue to rise.

Ultimately, the only way to calm the rising religious tensions is by developing a purposeful progressive scientific philosophy that can challenge the traditional religions by deconstructing their myths and showing how cosmic purpose and natural evolution might work seamlessly together, thereby forcing the religions to reform towards accepting scientific understandings in order to compete.

Evolutionary Metaphysics

Choosing to either believe or not believe in a cosmic purpose requires having blind faith in some unproven assumption. The only understanding that requires no leap of faith, and so therefore the only understanding in which we can be totally confident, is to keep our minds open to both possibilities, and to thoroughly examine them both to their eventual conclusions.

Examining both possibilities requires two strands of science: one science based on the assumption that the evolution of humankind was an accident of nature and the discovery of advanced technology was an unintended consequence; and a second strand of science based on the assumption that events in this universe are unfolding according to some kind of mysterious cosmic plan.

If there is a plan, then we should be able to find clues that tell us something about this plan by searching for patterns in the unfolding of history. Our goal should be to extend the theory of evolution to explain the rise of intelligent life, the conscious struggle for power and wealth, the discovery of advanced technology, and the change from natural evolution to 'consciously controlled evolution' through genetic engineering and artificial intelligence.

Extending the theory of evolution is something that is beyond the scope of biological science, and it is something that secular social science has refused to do for ideological reasons, because it cannot allow itself to admit that technological progress has any kind of purpose or value.

Extending the theory of evolution is the work of a new scientific philosophy called 'Evolutionary Metaphysics' whose purpose is to investigate all of the possibilities, to develop a reliable scientific alternative to traditional religion, and to establish a dependable theoretical foundation for a forward-looking community-focused political agenda.

Shattering the Sacred Myths - Chapter 18

Peace and Prosperity

Speculates about the social and political reforms needed to bring about lasting global peace and prosperity.

What kind of future are we blindly marching towards? If humans are just another stepping stone along the path to a greater evolution then will we eventually lose our value and be superseded by something new?

Some writers portray a bleak future where the despondent masses are treated like cattle, having become an unwanted burden to the techno-military elite. Others see humans searching like rats for scraps in the ruins of cities in the aftermath of economic collapse or nuclear war.

Our future will be what we make of it. However, if clear thinking and careful planning can overcome the destructive potential of blind greed, then perhaps we can look forward to a rewarding future.

Peace and prosperity

In the industrialized world, computerized machinery is slowly improving the productivity of farms and factories. Powerful computer software is gradually taking over routine office tasks, leading to major improvements in business productivity. Farms, factories, businesses, and even government departments are being driven by economic forces to become increasingly automated.

At the same time, the world economy is continuing to grow more productive and efficient, and the overall standard of living is continuing to improve. Energy production is becoming cleaner, and new recycling methods are improving environmental sustainability. Business profits are growing higher and many workers are continuing to enjoy higher pay, fewer working hours, and longer holidays.

The United Nations and its subsidiary institutions like the World Trade Organization and the World Court are continuing to become more effective as the remaining dictatorships are transformed into democracies, as cooperation between the nations is being secured through treaties and agreements, and as the barriers to international trade and travel are gradually removed.

National economies are slowly merging into a single worldwide economy as suppliers are being found through Internet websites, and as financial institutions become increasingly connected by global networks.

As new technologies improve the quality of education, and as the idea grows more acceptable that evolution is compatible with God, the traditional priesthoods will become less hostile to science, future generations will be less receptive to fundamentalist teachings, and the threat of any future religious conflict will fade away.

When computers and robots begin to demonstrate their full potential then the world economy will surge ahead, reaching unprecedented levels of prosperity, producing a massive surplus of material wealth which will flow across national borders and benefit everyone in the world.

India and China now have free birth control, and one day every woman in the world will be able to enjoy the luxury of choosing when to have children. With a stable world population and a booming

world economy, the wealthy nations will be able to relax their borders, no longer needing to fear a massive migration of people from underdeveloped and overcrowded countries.

Technopoly

As robots continue to replace factory workers, powerful computer software will soon begin to replace office workers. All of the secretarial, financial, administrative, and managerial tasks of business and government will slowly become automated, and eventually most 'thinking jobs' will be done by inexpensive computers using artificially intelligent software. There will be fewer and fewer job opportunities over the course of the next century.

In democratic countries, the growing numbers of unemployed will have the political power to demand higher welfare payments, free health care, affordable housing, and other benefits. The wealthy may not like having to pay for the permanently unemployed, but unless the growing numbers of unemployed can afford to be consumers, then the drop in demand will lead to a fall in production and the loss of even more jobs, and the shrinking world economy will spiral downwards into a devastating depression.

Once machines are capable of designing and manufacturing improved versions of themselves without human intervention, then the rate of technological advancement will skyrocket. Those who own this technology will gain an unchallengeable monopoly in every market. The vast majority of people will become unemployed and the free market economy will begin to fail.

Freedom

The entire world is going to need to change its way of thinking and become much more mature and responsible if we are going to have any chance of surviving the challenges ahead. We still need to avoid nuclear war, develop cheap clean energy, end the dictatorships, educate the fundamentalists, industrialize the poor countries, save the global environment, and stabilize the world's population.

But if we can overcome these difficulties, then the world economy will continue to become increasingly automated until production reaches maximum efficiency, and then everything will be free and nobody will have to work for a living any more, the machines will do all of the work.

When all of the social, political, and economic problems of the world have been solved, and peace and prosperity have prevailed, then nobody will ever be threatened again by hunger, disease, or war.

Eventually, the borders between nations will dissolve away, and the Africans, Americans, Arabs, Asians, Europeans, and Jews will all become citizens of a single worldwide democratic union, free to travel the world in safety and live wherever they want.

Material wealth will no longer be important to us when anything that anyone could ever want is free. Life will be like a permanent holiday, and every person in the world will be able to spend their days enjoying good times with their family and friends, and pursuing their dreams, interests, and desires.

Space exploration

Whether we like it or not, for better or for worse, assuming that we can avoid mass destruction, even if it takes another thousand years, then this is roughly what our future will look like, and any attempt to stop it will only result in disaster. The only justifiable complaint that we can have is that when we no longer need to worry about how to satisfy our material needs and desires then we will be faced with a new problem - what to do with our freedom.

Most scientifically minded people already understand that the evolution of intelligent life has probably occurred on countless other planets throughout the universe, like seeds that grow and then blossom into trees whose branches spread and yield astonishing fruit, spreading life and consciousness throughout the cosmos, possibly for the accomplishment of some unknown purpose.

The exploration of deep space and the colonization of other planets is something that intelligent machines will be better adapted for than humans: able to survive extreme conditions; needing little to sustain them on long voyages; able to replicate not only their bodies but also their minds; and able to synthesize new life forms whenever they are needed, both mechanical and biological life forms that will be perfectly adapted for any environment or task. Humans will merely be space tourists.

<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0975769626>

Editorial Reviews

From the Publisher

Shattering the Sacred Myths is a compelling, enlightening, and entertaining attempt to explain the existence of the universe in such a way as to shed light on whether there is any purpose or meaning to our lives.

The book begins with an easy-to-read step-by-step explanation of the natural evolution of humankind. It then follows the steps that led to the building of civilization and the discovery of advanced technologies like genetic engineering and artificial intelligence. After speculating about designer babies and thinking computers, it then considers the possibility that there may be some kind of cosmic purpose behind the evolution of a humanlike consciousness. This leads to the question of whether at the very highest level of reality there may exist a purposeful creative process rather than meaningless chaos or a mindless cosmic machine.

The book then explores how the traditional religions and philosophies have answered the question of human purpose. No sacred myth has been spared in an effort to uncover the most likely sequence of events that led to the formation of Judaism, Greek philosophy, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. This enlightening account of early human history concludes with a brutally honest analysis of metaphysical worldviews and systems of cooperative morality.

The book then summarizes the history of modern democracy. It focuses on the struggle for political and religious freedom - from the French and American revolutions to the formation of the United Nations. Rather than glorifying warmongers, the book focuses instead on the underlying motivations for global conflict, showing political history to be mostly a blind and greed-driven contest for wealth and power. From this position, the book examines modern day problems like third world dictatorships and religious fanaticism, as well as discussing issues like population growth and birth control.

In the final chapters, the book reflects on the emptiness of modern secular materialism, and explores humanism as both a worldview and a political movement in the form of human rights. After demolishing conservatism and dismissing postmodern skepticism, the author then attempts to establish a viable alternative to both moral relativism and the lingering influence of traditional religious morality. He proposes that by seeing consciousness as a natural force that accumulates information, we can derive a theoretical foundation for justice based upon the democratic decisions of free and educated people.

The book closes by speculating about the social and political reforms needed to bring about lasting global peace and prosperity. *Shattering the Sacred Myths* offers a stimulating interpretation of science, philosophy, politics, and religion. Its fearless myth busting and everyday language make it a thoroughly enjoyable book to read.

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When you have an open debate between conflicting points of view, the defenders of each viewpoint are pressured into presenting their best possible arguments. But those who cannot defend their beliefs have nothing to gain from an open debate. Their best strategy is to silence any opposition whenever their point of view is challenged.

Our world has a long history of political and religious extremists using violence to force their beliefs upon others. Even in the modern democratic world where freedom of speech has become an almost sacred right, this freedom is far from assured when it comes to matters of religion.

The reason why freedom of speech is so important is because the truth is more likely to be discovered if people have an opportunity to listen to every argument and decide for themselves. The only kind of truth that is really worth defending is the kind that can withstand criticism, and the kind that we can believe in without being forced to.

The following may not be true for everybody, but why should we let the truth stand in the way of a good story.

7 of 11 people found the following review helpful: 5.0 out of 5 stars **An objective search for truth,**
June 21, 2006

By [Robert A. Sass](#) - [See all my reviews](#)
(REAL NAME)

This review is from: *Shattering the Sacred Myths - The Metaphysics of Evolution* (Paperback)

I am a former full time minister, and seminary graduate. I have studied archaeology at several sites in Israel. I have long been a searcher for truth. As someone who left ministry because he understood the difference between myth and historical fact, it is about time I found some middle ground. This book gives a fascinating middle ground between the two extremes (the atheist-scientific camp, and the fundamental religious non open minded camp.)

The strengths of the book are the following:

1. This book is not out on an agenda to make a buck by slamming popular monotheistic western religions. This book spends little time doing that. The purpose of the book according to the author is the following: "In the hope of bringing some clarity into this confused world, this book was written to offer a realistic and convincing explanation of our place in the universe, hopefully crafted well enough to restore the faith of those who believe, and to give faith to those who do not yet believe, that there may be a purpose to our existence, and that the world may be progressing towards a peaceful and prosperous future." Thus, the goal is not just to make fun of or slam western religions. You cannot read between the lines some agenda to do that.
2. The book is honest, understanding the difference between philosophical questions, and scientific ones. The book searches the only two logical possibilities for the meaning of life and the reason for human existence. The book clearly states these two possibilities: "One possibility is that our universe exists for no reason and has no purpose, and so our lives have no meaning other than whatever meaning we invent for ourselves. The other possibility is that we were brought into existence by some kind of purposeful process beyond space and time. A process which designed the universe and planned the events that led to the evolution of intelligent life. At this point in time, there is no conclusive evidence to prove either way, and there may never be any evidence. In order to gain the best possible understanding of our existence, we need to open our minds to both possibilities and thoroughly examine them both to their eventual conclusions. This book will attempt to undertake such an examination." The vast majority of the book is a look at a vast amount of human history, and scientific studies, at an attempt to come to which is the most logical conclusion of the two choices mentioned. Its search is honest, and very open minded.
3. The book believes in common sense morality. An example would be the following: A strong man murders a weak man. The evolutionist would say "This is survival of the fittest." The author would say something along the lines of common sense morality, that we should do to others as we want done to us. One concern the author has is that religion is leading to terrorism that endangers all human kind. Thus the book cautions readers as to living in a world of myth and not fact and how it brainwashes people. But the book also has a chapter on sexual morality, and it is clear at least to me the author doesn't believe we should just go around cheating on our spouses because there may be no higher power watching. If there is no "God" as the western world understands, this doesn't mean we should not have ethics. The author gives solid logical arguments for good behavior for the benefit of mankind. It is clear to me the author loves life, and mankind, and wants to see what is in mankind's best interest.

The major weakness of the book is the lack of footnotes and evidence. As someone with a Master degree well grounded into the ancient history of the Middle East, I can vouch that its retelling of ancient history is accurate. However, since I am not a scientist, I found for example chapter two to be rough. If the book's goal is to use logical arguments to find truth, then I want evidence as well. Don't just tell me what the average scientist says about evolution, but give me some proof. Just listing what the average scientist believes is not helpful. For evolution is still a scientific theory (i.e. that is why it is called "Darwin's THEORY of evolution" because it has not become scientific LAW yet because the

evidence is not enough to prove it without doubt.) In searching for the meaning of life, and if there is evidence in our universe that the universe or multiverse was created in such a way that some lifeform becoming self aware as humans have is inevitable, that is a philosophical logical argument, but one that reason alone cannot prove.

I do recommend this book highly. The fact is we may never know if there is life after death or purpose for our existence. Sure, some will say "If we do become ghosts or go to heaven, we will know." Fine. But reality is, when I fall asleep, I do not realize I was asleep until the alarm goes off, or I wake up. The same may be true when I die. Death may be like sleep, but we may never wake up. Some things we may never know, and at least this is a possibility that is discussed. There are some things that science may never be able to answer. Thus, the book opens up many a possibility, and was not negative at the expense of western religious traditions for the sake of making a buck in book sales.